



# EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL



## EDITORIAL

Dear readers,

With the arrival of spring on the horizon, the EESC welcomes March with two fantastic events that reflect the very core of the Committee's identity: civil society and young people.

From 2 to 5 March 2026, the third edition of **Civil Society Week**, entitled [People, Democracy, Resilience – Our Future](#), will focus on advancing diversity, civic engagement, equality and inclusion as key pathways to renewing Europe's social and democratic promise for future generations.

An integral part of Civil Society Week is the **European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**, a proven instrument enabling citizens to propose EU action. Now in its 14th year, the ECI event marks a significant milestone, as four initiatives have each surpassed one million signatures in recent months.

Moving on, from 19-20 March the EESC will welcome young people from all EU Member States, the candidate countries and the UK. With the popular acronym **YEYS**, the Committee's landmark youth event [Your Europe, Your Say!](#) is designed to be more than just an event but rather a space for young people to connect, engage actively and shape democratic life across Europe.

Under the theme *Meaningful Connections, Active Participation and Democratic Engagement*, YEYS attracted strong interest from young people, especially from candidate countries and Ukraine, showing that their heart beats in the EU.

That is why Civil Society Week and YEYS matter. They provide timely platforms for organised civil society, citizens and young people from across Europe to make their voices heard on key issues – particularly at a moment when Europe faces profound societal, technological, economic and geopolitical challenges.

The overwhelming interest shown by young Ukrainians in our youth event clearly demonstrates that their aspirations and dreams are firmly rooted in the European family.

Their enthusiasm stands in stark contrast to the difficult reality their country continues to endure.

As Ukraine enters its fourth winter of full-scale war, Russia continues to weaponise winter by targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable civilians and leaving people to freeze in their own homes.

Now more than ever, the Committee, together with all EU institutions and civil society organisations, must continue to provide tangible support and demonstrate solidarity in action. The EESC has stood firmly with Ukraine since the first day of the invasion, opening its doors to civil

society and young people alike.

24 February marks the fourth anniversary of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which continues to claim thousands of lives.

On this occasion, we are dedicating this issue to Ukraine and giving the floor to Ukrainian civil society organisations and journalists – and to their European counterparts – who work tirelessly to support the Ukrainian population and to tell the truth about what is happening on the ground.

I invite you to read our newsletter and I urge you to support the Ukrainian people in any way you can. Now is not the time to look away.

I also warmly invite you to take part in the dialogue at our two upcoming events. In this House, your voice can be heard and turned into action. Join us and seize this opportunity to help shape change.

Together, let us safeguard the civic space, so priceless for our democracy and vital for our society, by engaging in open dialogue and remaining vigilant in the face of the current challenges

**Marija Hanževački**

**EESC Vice-President for Communication**

## DIARY DATES

26 February 2026

**Launch of the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2026**

2-5 March 2026

**Civil Society Week 2026**

3 March 2026

**ECI Day 2026**

18-19 March 2026

**EESC plenary session**

19-20 March 2026

**Your Europe, Your Say! 2026**



## THE SURPRISE GUEST

Our surprise guest, Ukrainian journalist **Tetyana Ogarkova**, describes the cruellest winter of all time in Kyiv. The wintry beauty goes hand in hand with Arctic cold as Russia's relentless bombings of the energy infrastructure are plunging residents into freezing darkness every single day. When the power comes back, which is for a few hours at best, people check the news, only to find that no one is coming to save them except their own.



## THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WINTER

**By Tetyana Ogarkova**

It's the most beautiful winter we've ever had. Snowflakes dancing in the air, deep snowdrifts covering the fields, snow-laden trees, landscapes glowing like something from a Bruegel painting.

But it's also the cruellest winter. The wintry beauty goes hand in hand with Arctic cold, temperatures dropping to -20°C or even -30°C, black ice on the roads and constant Russian strikes against our energy

infrastructure.

Sporadic and methodical since October 2025, these strikes took a truly genocidal turn in January 2026. More than a thousand residential buildings in the capital will be without heating until the spring, after three power stations on the left bank were destroyed. In mid-February, after the latest massive attack on the nuclear power stations in the west of the country, Kyiv has only 1.5-2 hours of electricity out of every 24.

'In this country we do not forget winters,' writes our friend, the poet and soldier Yaryna Chornohuz, in her poetry collection whose title 'This is how we remain free' captures the spirit of Ukrainians.

Ukrainian social media has turned into a running chronicle of everyday survival. How do you heat a home without central heating? How do you cook without an oven? How do you drive out the damp that eats into the walls? How do you protect the water pipes?

In my sister's apartment, a family of tenants with three children sleep in a tent perched on a sofa to keep warm.

In the apartment of a friend – a history teacher – the bathroom facilities have become unusable: the building's plumbing system has frozen. A former diplomat colleague saw his flat flooded after the cold caused the heating pipes to burst.

Power cuts punctuate everyday life. During the rare hours with power (2 hours out of 24 in Kyiv in the past few days), you have to cook, charge all the batteries, refill the water supplies (without electricity there's no tap water), do the shopping (and carry it up however many floors without the lift), do the washing up, put the washing machine on, take a shower and hoover. For many flats, the rare hours with electricity are the only source of heat and comfort before they quickly slip back into darkness and cold.

When the power comes back on, people check the news. They learn that Trump considers the negotiations in Abu Dhabi to be 'making good progress', that the war should end in the summer and that Putin has 'kept his word' on the week-long ceasefire (which lasted three days!). They hear NATO secretary-general Mark Rutte announce, from the rostrum of the Ukrainian parliament, that after the ceasefire Ukraine will receive ships, planes and troops from its allies to protect the country against any potential new Russian attack. The European 'coalition of the willing' says it is ready to 'guarantee Ukraine's security' as soon as peace arrives.

But what do we do in the meantime, with the Russians bombing us every night? The European allies say they're ready for war – as long as the war is already over. They insist they're ready to fight – provided there's no fighting left to do.

For us, the defence cannot pause. We have to repair what we can today. To carry on with life, raise our children and hold on – today, tonight, tomorrow morning.

A week ago, in the midst of this endless cold, we set off for the front to deliver two cars for the Ukrainian army.

Miles and miles of roads leading to the front are covered with fishing nets, to protect civilian and military traffic from small Russian drones. The roads feel like strange, fleeting tunnels – almost surreal. On either side, despite the protection, there are crashed cars, destroyed by drones: a tanker truck, a lorry, a military vehicle, a civilian vehicle. These are the ones who didn't manage to reach their destination, those the nets couldn't save.

Despite the constant danger, the road isn't empty: cars are travelling in both directions. In this world where light and safety are fleeting, something very solid stands out. The quiet resolve to keep going, not to give in, to live without any guarantee or promise of tomorrow. We fill up with winter fuel and set off.

As I watch the sun glinting on the nets that look like spiders' hairs, I make myself a promise: as soon as I'm back home, I'll take my children to the ice rink. It will be open and lit, thanks to the generator. We'll laugh, slide around, fall over and get back up, enjoy the winter. The rink's generator will give us the same illusion of normality as those nets on the roads near the front line.

In the end, my children will have no other childhood than this one – in the middle of a war, with two hours of electricity a day. For our soldiers, the only battle is the one taking place right now, under those remarkably fragile fishing-net shields. The prospect of any future 'peace' feels very far off.

In the meantime, it's the most beautiful winter we've ever had. One we won't forget.

**Tetyana Ogarkova** is coordinator of the international department of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center and co-presenter of the podcast 'Explaining Ukraine'. She is also a lecturer at Mohyla University in Kyiv and has a PhD in literature from Paris XII Val-de-Marne University. Tetyana is a much sought-after guest on television and radio programmes around the world, where she describes the dramatic plight of the Ukrainian people and provides deep insights into this human tragedy.

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## ONE QUESTION TO...

What are the EESC's recommendations on the 2026 European Semester - Autumn Package? **Luca Jahier**, rapporteur of the EESC [opinion](#) on the topic, argues that the European Semester is a turning point for completely resetting the EU's economic strategy so that the Union can adequately respond to emerging political and economic realities. Speaking to EESC Info, he outlined the Committee's proposals for an ambitious Semester aimed at achieving European sovereign stability.

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## POLITICAL PRIORITIES FOR AN AMBITIOUS EUROPEAN SEMESTER: INVESTMENTS, SINGLE MARKET AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

**By Luca Jahier**

The starting point of the EESC opinion on the 2026 European Semester - Autumn Package, unanimously adopted by the EESC's Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion on 5 February, is that Europe's main liability is its chronic lack of investment. This gap undermines productivity, innovation and, ultimately, the continent's strategic sovereignty.

While acting with appropriate foresight is urgent, the EESC regrets that, for the second consecutive year, the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey (ASGS) is absent from the package, despite being an integrated and forward-looking analytical tool that the EU desperately needs.

In the opinion, which contains 18 recommendations on the 2026 European Semester Autumn Package, the EESC outlines a united European response to multiple crises, from geopolitical instability and the climate crisis to Europe's increasingly dramatic technological and digital gap, as well as the demographic challenges.

Our 18 recommendations can be condensed into five key political priorities that must anchor an ambitious reset of EU economic governance:

**Large-scale investments** – Europe needs a common fiscal capacity, supported by targeted European debt issuance, and permanent macroeconomic stabilisation instruments modelled on the success of the SURE instrument. Without a significant leap in investments in infrastructure, technologies, welfare (including housing policies) and human capital, Europe will not be able to compete.

**Integrated capital markets** – Financial fragmentation is a political and economic obstacle. The Committee proposes a radical solution: it calls on the Commission to assess whether a regulatory framework like the US National Securities Markets Improvement Act (NSMIA) of 1996 could be a model for simplifying cross-border access, reducing regulatory fragmentation and, finally, creating a true single European capital market, instead of 27 siloed systems. Only in this way can European savings finance European investments.

**Strengthened economic and social governance** – The EU's response must combine competitiveness and social equity. The Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) and the debt sustainability analysis (DSA) methodology must be reviewed, the Social Scoreboard strengthened and well-being indicators introduced, as proposed by the Joint Research Centre. Governance structures must treat social convergence and investment on an equal footing with fiscal surveillance. Regulatory simplification must not overlook the benefits of the European social model and must avoid jeopardising 'green' investments, which are so crucial for collective competitiveness and resilience.

**Human capital as strategic infrastructure** – The EESC views the new recommendation included in the Commission's package very positively because training, skills and mutual recognition of qualifications are not optional – they are a strategic necessity. However, it is time to move from words to action, providing clear binding investment guidance to Member States in next spring's country-specific recommendations.

**European cooperation on defence** – Strengthening autonomous defensive capability is essential, but uncoordinated national spending risks inefficiency, dependence on non-EU suppliers and, ultimately, more unsustainable debt. The EESC calls on the Commission to strengthen conditionalities for collaborative procurement, prioritise truly European projects, and anchor defence investments within a cohesive EU governance strategy, beyond the temporary escape clause for a few Member States.

Finally, the Committee underscores once again the need for a more democratic European Semester: social partners and civil society must not be passive observers, but active architects of the strategic reforms Europe needs. They must truly sit at the table – not be on the menu.

The EESC declares itself ready to fully support a European Semester worthy of our common ambitions – competitiveness, resilience and social and territorial cohesion – for a European sovereign sustainability.



## TO THE POINT

Sodium batteries are emerging as a promising alternative to traditional lithium-ion systems. EESC member **Paul Rübig**, rapporteur of the opinion [\*Enhancing EU strategic autonomy and developing a greener and bluer economy: the potential of the sodium battery manufacturing sector\*](#), highlights the importance of this technology in increasing the EU's energy independence and enhancing its competitiveness in the global market.

## SODIUM BATTERY MANUFACTURING: A PATH TO EUROPE'S ENERGY INDEPENDENCE

**By Paul Rübig**

Sodium batteries are emerging as an alternative to traditional lithium-ion systems for a range of strategic sectors. For this reason, in our [opinion](#), we highlight their importance in boosting the EU's energy independence and competitiveness in the global market.

Sodium batteries offer not only a more environmentally friendly option, but also an opportunity for Europe to develop an ecosystem that integrates research, industry and workforce development. Building such



an ecosystem requires strong collaboration among stakeholders, including governments, the private sector and research and technology organisations.

To fully leverage the potential of sodium battery technology, the EU needs to implement support measures such as investment subsidies and production tax credits. These financial incentives can stimulate demand and help scale up production. Our opinion also calls for increased investment in collaborative research and development (R&D), particularly in areas such as solid electrolytes and sodium-saltwater systems, with a proposed budget of at least EUR 220 billion.

Furthermore, the sustainable manufacturing of sodium batteries is essential. The production process should prioritise eco-design and recycling from the outset, in line with the EU's Green Deal and Circular Economy Action Plan. This approach will help ensure that sodium batteries make a positive contribution to both the economy and the environment.

As global interest in sodium batteries continues to grow, we call for a well-planned market entry strategy. Regulatory hurdles must be addressed through simplified permitting processes, particularly where existing infrastructure and skills from lithium-ion technology can be utilised. This will enable the rapid establishment of production sites and allow the EU to keep pace with international developments in battery technology.

To maximise the impact of sodium battery initiatives, strong workforce strategies must also be prioritised. This includes investing in training programmes that address skills gaps and engage local communities, ensuring that the growth of this sector is inclusive and benefits all stakeholders.

Overall, the transition to sodium battery manufacturing presents significant potential for Europe, fostering technological sovereignty, energy independence and sustainability. Through strategic investment, collaborative ecosystems and supportive regulation, the EU can position itself as a leader in this industry, paving the way for a greener and more sustainable future.

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## EESC NEWS



## EUROPE'S COMPETITIVENESS DEPENDS ON STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a debate on how Europe can maintain its industrial edge amid rising energy costs, fragile supply chains and the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence.**

The debate was organised by the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), which examines how industrial transformation is reshaping Europe's economy, jobs and communities. As its president **Alain Coheur** explained, the CCMI aims to act as a 'laboratory for strategic foresight', developing practical proposals to help European industry adapt to ongoing change.

EESC President, **Séamus Boland**, highlighted the stakes: 'In these times of industrial change, geopolitical upheaval and shrinking civic space, the CCMI's foresight mission has never been more vital'.

Former European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, **Nicolas Schmit**, said that Europe must be ready for economic, technological and geopolitical disruptions, and be deliberate in its investment choices. 'Europe is operating in a world of uncertainty, where old assumptions no longer hold', Mr Schmit said. 'Industrial policy can no longer be business as usual. It must combine investment, innovation and quality jobs, if Europe wants to remain competitive and protect its social model'.

Mr Schmit also cautioned against reading Europe's competitiveness gap solely through comparisons with the US, noting that their headline productivity figures are heavily shaped by the dominance of a small number of technology giants and do not necessarily reflect a more balanced or resilient economic model.

Digitalisation and AI featured prominently in the discussion, with speakers stressing that innovation without parallel investment in skills and fair working conditions risks widening social and economic gaps. The main takeaway was clear: Europe's competitiveness has become one of the EU's most urgent economic challenges, demanding long-term strategies rather than short-term fixes.

The proposals discussed will feed directly into the EESC's work in the coming months, informing EU decisions on industrial policy, competitiveness, and jobs. (gb)



## APPLY AI STRATEGY: BUILDING TRUSTWORTHY AI CAN BE EUROPE'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

**EESC calls for swift, concrete action to accelerate AI deployment across the EU, especially for SMEs and scale-ups. In a global AI race driven by speed and scale, Europe must position reliability and trustworthiness as its defining strengths.**

At its January plenary session, the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** gave its backing to the European Commission's Apply AI Strategy, which seeks to move AI from research and hype to real use in business and public services.

During a plenary debate with the European Commission and AI experts before the adoption of the EESC's [opinion](#) on the strategy, the EESC stressed that AI must be trustworthy, transparent and human-centric.

Europe's competitive advantage lies in an approach to AI that considers both technological progress and the protection of human dignity, workers' rights and fundamental freedoms.

EESC President **Séamus Boland** said: 'As AI evolves rapidly, Europe cannot afford fragmented approaches or uneven capabilities across Member States and sectors. The gap between technological innovation and practical deployment is still significant, and we must address it collectively.'

**Lucilla Sioli**, Director of the Artificial Intelligence Office at the European Commission, said that the slow progress in governance implementation across Member States risks undermining the development of trustworthy and compliant AI: 'We call on the Member States to revise their AI strategies and align them with the vision and ambitions of the Apply AI Strategy.'

In its opinion, the EESC calls for swift, concrete action to accelerate AI deployment across the EU, particularly for SMEs and scale-ups. It strongly advocates simpler access to funding, lighter administrative requirements and clearer intellectual property rules, alongside stronger regional AI ecosystems built on European digital innovation hubs. The Committee also stresses the need for sustained investment in AI skills.

**Max Reddel**, Advanced AI Director at the Centre for Future Generations, commended the EESC's emphasis on building sovereign European AI capabilities and avoiding dependence on foreign AI systems, including non-European frontier models.

'Europe's strength is reliability. We build technology that doesn't break. ASML's lithography machines. Airbus aircraft. Technologies so precise and dependable that we lead markets others pioneered. We can replicate this in AI,' Mr Reddel said. (II)



## ENSURING JUSTICE AND EQUALITY FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

**At its January 2026 plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a resolution setting out the EU's priorities for the 70th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UN CSW70). Centred on access to justice, women's participation in public life and the elimination of gender-based violence, the resolution outlines a roadmap for strengthening women's rights and reinforcing democracy in Europe and globally.**

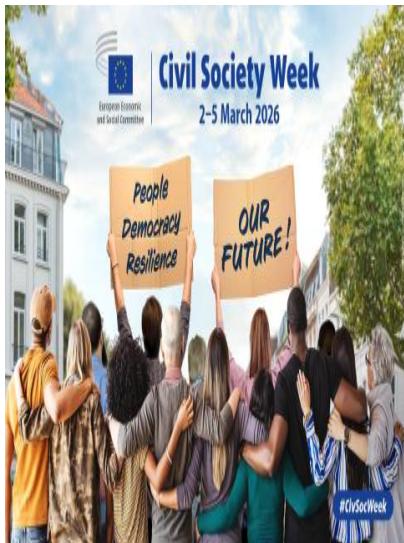
The EESC highlights that women and girls worldwide continue to face legal, financial, social and digital barriers that prevent them from defending their rights. During the plenary debate, the rapporteurs

stressed the urgency of removing discriminatory laws, improving legal aid and ensuring justice systems are accessible, affordable and gender-responsive. They also emphasised the importance of civil society and social partners in supporting women who face discrimination, violence or exploitation.

Access to justice, the Committee notes, is both a human right and a prerequisite for exercising all other rights. To address persistent barriers, the [resolution](#) calls for eliminating discriminatory legislation, strengthening gender-responsive judicial institutions, expanding affordable legal aid and ensuring the safety and confidentiality of survivors of violence. It also stresses the need for more women in judicial careers and for mandatory gender-bias training for legal professionals. Digitalisation is highlighted as another priority, with Member States urged to expand digital literacy and ensure online legal information is accessible to all women.

CSW70 will also assess progress on women's participation in public life and efforts to eliminate violence against women. The EESC underscores the need for equal representation, zero tolerance for gender-based violence and protection for female human-rights defenders, especially where civic space is shrinking.

Finally, the Committee commits to advancing CSW70 outcomes through strengthened civil dialogue, gender-responsive budgeting, awareness-raising and improved data collection.(Im)



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## SECURE YOUR SPOT AT THE EESC'S CIVIL SOCIETY WEEK 2026!

**Registrations are now open** for the third edition of Civil Society Week, taking place from 2 to 5 March 2026 at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in Brussels, under the title *People, Democracy, Resilience – Our Future!*.

As the institutional house of organised civil society, the EESC will once again bring together civil society organisations, citizens, EU institutions, national economic and social councils and stakeholders from across Europe, including candidate countries, for four days of exchange, reflection and cooperation.

The third edition of Civil Society Week will focus on tackling poverty, reducing social exclusion, involving citizens and bridging divides across regions and generations to rebuild trust and foster lasting social cohesion. In this context, advancing diversity, civic engagement, equality and inclusion are key pathways to renewing Europe's social and democratic promise for future generations.

Civil Society Week 2026 will offer a timely space to collectively reflect on these challenges considering Europe's evolving political, social and economic landscape.

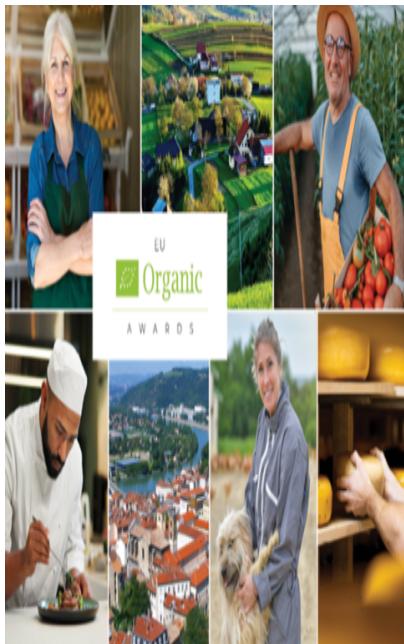
The programme will feature a series of thematic panels led by the EESC's Liaison Group with European civil society networks. Among other things, they will touch upon issues topping European public debates such as affordable housing, education, the European Democracy Shield, funding civic space and democratic and media resilience.

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day will take place on 3 March, highlighting participatory democracy and citizens' involvement in EU policymaking. Speakers will include organisers of ECIs, including *My Voice, My Choice; Stop Destroying Video Games; Demand the full suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement in view of Israel's violations of human rights; Food is a Human Right for All! Guaranteeing healthy, just and sustainable food systems*.

The week will also include a dedicated session to be held by EU national economic and social councils on 2 March, as well as a screening on 4 March of the film *Deaf (Sorda)*, nominated for the LUX Audience Award. The event will conclude on 5 March with a reception and conversation to mark International Women's Day.

Speakers include EESC and Committee of the Regions members, MEPs, representatives of the European Commission, the European Ombudsman, prominent researchers, civil society activists and representatives of civil society organisations from across Europe.

We would love it if you could join us! Secure your spot and **[register now](#)**. **You can follow all updates to the programme** via the [event webpage](#).



## EU ORGANIC AWARDS 2026: APPLICATIONS OPEN TO CELEBRATE EUROPE'S ORGANIC EXCELLENCE

**The fifth edition of the [EU Organic Awards](#) launched on 10 February!**

The awards are jointly organised by the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, Copa-Cogeca and IFOAM Organics Europe. They aim to recognise excellence throughout the organic value chain, rewarding the best and most innovative players in EU organic production.

The EESC is responsible for three of the seven awards: the **best organic food-processing SME, the best organic food retailer and the best restaurant/food service.**

Applications will be accepted via an online form between **10 February** until **26 April 2025** on [this page](#). Please spread the word.

Watch [these videos](#) of last year's winners, selected by the EESC, and learn more about their organic journey.

For further information, you are welcome to contact the EESC secretariat at [EuorganicawardsEESC@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:EuorganicawardsEESC@eesc.europa.eu).



Cyprus' Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Marilena Raouna, and EESC President Séamus Boland © EU/EESC

## CYPRUS PRESIDENCY HIGHLIGHTS PARTNERSHIP WITH EESC AND ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY

**Debates at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) plenary revealed strong alignment between the Cyprus Presidency's five priorities and the Committee's own work programme: security and preparedness, competitiveness, openness to the world, a Union of values that leaves no one behind and a robust long-term EU budget.**

Following a presentation by **Marilena Raouna**, Cyprus's Deputy Minister for European Affairs, EESC members discussed the presidency's priorities under the motto *An Autonomous Union. Open to the World*. The Cyprus Presidency invited the EESC to contribute expertise through 14 exploratory opinions, providing recommendations on EU legislative proposals and strategic issues while reflecting the views of social partners and organised civil society.

The Committee will focus on tackling energy poverty through affordable and sustainable housing, boosting Europe's water resilience via the Water Resilience Strategy and promoting social inclusion and independent living for people with disabilities. The EESC provides valuable policy experience that reflects civil society's perspectives.

EESC President **Séamus Boland** noted that 'The priorities of the Cyprus Presidency resonate closely with my programme, which focuses on opportunity, security and resilience, with the fight against poverty at its core.' **Ms Raouna** underscored early cooperation with organised civil society: 'Employers, workers and civil society organisations must remain at the heart of EU policymaking.'

Participants highlighted the challenging context of geopolitical uncertainty, climate pressures and rapid technological change. The presidency reaffirmed its commitment to comprehensive security, including water security and resilience against hybrid threats. The EESC's EU Blue Deal initiative complements this by promoting sustainable water management.

The presidency aims to strengthen the single market, reduce administrative burdens, support SMEs and advance the green and digital transitions. Affordable energy, modern infrastructure and strong interconnections were highlighted as essential for strategic autonomy.

Affordable housing was also identified as a pressing challenge, alongside gender equality, disability rights and social inclusion. Cyprus also aims to advance discussions on the 2028-2034 multiannual financial framework. The EESC warns that underfunding would undermine cohesion, agriculture and social investment, calling for a stronger budget that ensures no region is left behind. (tk/fb)

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## EESC MARKS FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF RUSSIA'S MILITARY AGGRESSION WITH SCREENINGS HIGHLIGHTING SOLIDARITY WITH UKRAINE



**On 18 February, the European Economic and Social Committee held a plenary side event marking four years since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine.**

The programme included two screenings that painted a powerful portrait of the lived realities of war and Europe's unwavering solidarity with Ukraine.

*Hey Czechs!*, a lyrical documentary by Czech director David Van, was filmed during two humanitarian missions organised by the Czech initiative Memory of Nations, which brought medical supplies and vehicles to Ukraine. The author, who tells the story through the eyes of someone encountering the war for the first time, offers a glimpse of humanitarian workers in action and life in war-torn areas. Through frontline encounters with locals and soldiers, he captures moments of life under constant air strikes, the horrors left behind by Russian occupiers but also the humanity and humour that endure despite the devastation.

The event also featured a short Polish reportage produced by Deutsche Welle, *Grupa Valentyna*, which portrays a group of volunteers from Gdańsk supporting Ukrainian children affected by the war.

EESC President **Séamus Boland** and the Ambassador of Ukraine to the EU, **Vsevolod Chentsov** opened the event. The screenings were followed by a discussion moderated by EESC Vice-President for Communication **Marija Hanževački**, with contributions from the film's director **David Van**, Head of Ukraine Support at Memory of Nations **Martin Ocknecht** and Head of Deutsche Welle Poland **Bartosz Dudek**. (ab)

## CONNECTING EUROPE FACILITY – EESC CALLS FOR STRONG INCREASE IN FUNDING FOR ENERGY AND TRANSPORT



**According to an EESC [opinion](#) adopted at the January plenary, the EU key funding instrument should be reinforced with EUR 20 billion to make the implementation of cross-border investments in energy and transport a reality. This is essential to urgently strengthen the EU's resilience and increase security.**

The opinion, drafted by **Mateusz Szymański** and **Tomas Arvidsson**, underlines that the funding planned for energy and transport in the new *Connecting Europe Facility* (CEF) is insufficient and should be increased to at least EUR 100 billion for the period 2028-2034.

In addition, the EESC points out that the CEF programme should prioritise investments in regions with significant infrastructure gaps both in transport and energy. The objective is to ensure territorial cohesion and full use of the single market.

In order to ensure equal access, transparency and predictability of the CEF programme, the new legislation should clarify which projects will be prioritised. On this matter, the Committee recommends introducing

eligibility criteria which highlight projects enabling the urgent development of the EU's capacity to build resilience and preparedness against threats, including from hostile countries.

CEF funding should be granted to projects which fulfil social and environmental criteria and create added value for the European Union. For geopolitical reasons, the EESC views shorter supply chains as a sensible goal to pursue. (mp)



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## EESC GIVES FULL SUPPORT TO MY VOICE, MY CHOICE INITIATIVE

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has given its backing to the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) *My Voice, My Choice: For Safe and Accessible Abortion*, endorsing its proposal for an EU solidarity mechanism enabling women who cannot access abortion in their home country to receive care in another Member State.**

During its January plenary session, the EESC adopted an [opinion](#) on the ECI, following a debate that underscored that abortion is a fundamental human right that must be protected for every woman.

EESC President **Séamus Boland** stressed civil society's essential role, stating that 'ensuring that rights and services are not only guaranteed in principle, but accessible in practice, lies at the heart of social justice and political responsibility.'

The debate highlighted persistent inequalities across Europe, where restrictive laws or insufficient healthcare force many women abroad or leave them without safe options.

The European Commission's Deputy Director-General for Justice and Consumers **Irena Mootzová** noted that the Commission is evaluating the ECI, with conclusions expected by 2 March. Members of the European Parliament and civil society groups warned of a global backlash against reproductive rights. Member of the European Parliament's Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM) **Abir Al-Sahlani** noted that 'history was made' when Parliament adopted a resolution supporting the ECI, while **Mary Collins** of the European Women's Lobby stressed the need to push back against disinformation.

The rapporteur of the EESC's opinion, **José Antonio Moreno Díaz**, reiterated the Committee's stance: 'The EESC opinion fully supports the *My Voice, My Choice* initiative, which recognises the right to abortion as a woman's right to privacy, integrity, sexuality, personal autonomy and, ultimately, health.'

The [initiative](#), backed by more than 1.2 million signatures, calls for an EU financial mechanism covering abortion-related costs for women lacking access at home. The Committee agreed in its opinion, stressing that access must not depend on geography or income, and that obstructing abortion may amount to institutional gender-based violence.(Im)



## A STRONGER EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND FOR A MORE SOCIAL EUROPE

**The European Economic and Social Committee is calling for a significantly strengthened European Social Fund (ESF) within future National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). The ESF must remain central to ensuring quality employment, lifelong learning, social inclusion and equal opportunities during the 2028-2034 programming period.**

In an [opinion](#) adopted at its January plenary session, the EESC stated that the European Commission's proposal to reorganise cohesion and agricultural funding under a single strategic architecture can only succeed if the [ESF](#) retains its distinct mission, prioritises those most in need and continues to be shaped by meaningful partnerships with social

actors at all levels.

To address Europe's social and economic challenges – from the green and digital transitions to persistent poverty and unequal access to services – the Committee called for raising social spending under the NRPPs from 14% to 20%, with at least 14% specifically dedicated to the ESF. It also asked for clearer rules on what constitutes social expenditure.

The ESF's multilevel governance model should be maintained, keeping national and regional programmes mandatory. The EESC called for systematic consultation of social partners and civil society, mandatory voting rights for them on ESF monitoring committees and dedicating at least 1% of ESF resources in all Member States to strengthening their administrative capacity.

On skills and employment, the EESC highlighted the need for stronger vocational training, adult learning, STEM and digital skills, improved apprenticeships and support for youth employment, including allocating at least 20% of ESF resources to the reinforced Youth Guarantee.

The Committee further called for expanding ESF support for social inclusion, high-quality social services, work-life balance, elderly and disability care, mental and physical health, and affordable housing.(Im)



## EESC WELCOMES INCREASED HORIZON EU BUDGET BUT CALLS FOR STRONGER GOVERNANCE

**The EU's expanded budget envelope for Horizon Europe sends a strong political signal, underscoring Europe's ambition to strengthen competitiveness and strategic autonomy.**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the European Commission proposal for Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship programme for funding research and innovation, underlining that science, research and innovation must remain central to the European project.

At a time of intensifying global competition and rapid technological change, a strong and well-governed EU research and innovation policy is essential to reinforcing Europe's competitiveness, cohesion and strategic autonomy, while delivering tangible benefits for citizens across all Member States, the EESC stressed in [an opinion](#) adopted at its January plenary.

The EU's commitment of EUR 175 billion to research and innovation for the 2028-2034 period – a substantial increase from EUR 95 billion under the previous cycle – is a major step forward.

'The EU's commitment of EUR 175 billion to research and innovation for the 2028-2034 period sends a strong signal in favour of scientific excellence, sound governance and strategic impact. In this context, the EESC has identified the priorities to improve the mechanisms currently under development', said **Christophe Lefèvre**, rapporteur of the opinion.

However, the EESC stressed that this amount should serve only as a baseline for negotiations between the Council and the European Parliament. Any reduction below this level would represent a missed opportunity at a time when sustained investment in R&I is critical for Europe's future. The EESC also warned that high inflation and rising costs risk diminishing the real value of the proposed funding envelope.

A central concern of the opinion was the need to strengthen oversight of how Horizon Europe funds are used, with effective monitoring systems essential for ensuring fair access and optimal use of EU resources. The EESC considered it imperative to identify obstacles to fund uptake and ascertain the factors behind underspending in certain countries. It cautioned against linking funding to 3% GDP targets, which could disproportionately affect countries with lower R&D capacities.

The Committee also recommended aligning Horizon Europe with the European Competitiveness Fund, and called for project assessment beyond scientific excellence to include commercial relevance and industrial impact, ensuring coherent governance across all EU instruments. (fb)



Rapporteurs Diamantouros, Biegon, and Jahier during the January 2026 plenary

## THE EU'S AMBITIONS CANNOT BE DELIVERED ON THE CHEAP

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) warns that a weak long-term EU budget would undermine competitiveness, cohesion, agriculture and democracy. In a set of eight newly adopted opinions, the Committee calls for a stronger, fairer and future-proof multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2028 to 2034, highlighting key risks, including proposed cuts to the common**

**agricultural policy (CAP), dilution of cohesion and social investment and insufficient support for youth, skills and innovation.**

As negotiations on the EU's next long-term budget continue, European organised civil society is sending a clear message through the EESC: the EU cannot afford a budget that falls short of its ambitions. With this new set of policy recommendations to the European institutions, the EESC calls for a substantially stronger MFF, one that protects cohesion and agriculture, invests in people and skills, increases EU competitiveness and ensures that no region or generation is left behind.

'The next EU budget is not a technical exercise, it is a political choice about what kind of Europe we want,' EESC President **Séamus Boland** stressed during the plenary.

'The EU budget must be future-proof. Cohesion, good governance and strong social rules are essential for making funding work and supporting the green and digital transitions,' said MFF rapporteur **Dominika Biegon**.

Europe faces unprecedented investment needs, from the green and digital transitions and security challenges to demographic shifts, skills shortages and geopolitical pressures. However, the EESC warns that the Commission's proposed MFF increase would barely keep pace with inflation, while NextGenerationEU debt repayment risks crowding out future investment.

Beyond budget levels, the EESC strongly warns against merging key EU policies into a single fund, forcing cohesion, agriculture, fisheries, social inclusion and security to compete with each other. This would weaken long-term investment, increase regional inequalities and undermine EU trust.

The Committee insists that cohesion policy must remain available to all regions and rejects proposals to cut the CAP. Investment in people must also be central, with stronger funding for Erasmus+ and youth programmes.

Across all areas, the EESC sends the same signal: the EU's ambitions cannot be delivered on the cheap. Civil society urges the Commission, Parliament and Council to treat the next MFF as a strategic investment plan, not a mere budgetary compromise. (tk/fb)

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## PRESIDENT BOLAND ON FIRST 100 DAYS OF MANDATE AND PRIORITIES FOR 2026

**EESC President Séamus Boland reflects on his first 100 days in office and outlines his priorities for 2026. His vision is of a *Union of opportunities, security and resilience*, grounded in strong civil society. The early months of his mandate have convinced him that civil society must be central to shaping Europe's future.**

President Boland warns that in the drive for competitiveness, defence and security, the EU must not lose sight of its values or social model. Exclusion, shrinking civic space and growing economic divides risk undermining democracy and fuelling extremism. Listening to workers, small businesses and communities is therefore essential to building effective and legitimate policies.

In his first months, he has met the **Presidents of the European Council and Parliament**, Commissioners, MEPs, ministers and ambassadors, and visited the Baltic countries to demonstrate solidarity. A private audience with **Pope Leo XIV** underscored shared concerns on poverty, dignity and defending democratic space. These discussions have made clear that competitiveness and security must be underpinned by strong social policies.

For 2026, sustainable competitiveness will remain a core priority. This includes tackling affordable housing, promoting a unified energy market, improving gender equality in the labour market, and ensuring AI development remains human-centred. The EESC will contribute to the EU's anti-poverty strategy and host a high-level conference in October.

The mental health of young people will be highlighted through a dedicated plenary debate, while the Youth Test will continue ensuring policies consider future generations. Enlargement will stay central, particularly through the Enlargement Candidate Members mechanism, which strengthens the accession process by involving civil society directly.

Throughout 2026, President Boland will continue to defend democracy, human rights and civic space – essential pillars of peace and stability – and ensure the voices of ordinary citizens reach the heart of Europe.(Im)

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## INDIAN CULTURAL EVENING AT THE EESC

**On 3 February 2026, the EESC hosted an Indian Cultural Evening in the Jacques Delors building that attracted an exceptional turnout of around 150 participants.**

Organised in partnership with the Embassy of India in Brussels, the event began with opening remarks from **Marija Hanževački**, Vice-President for Communication, and featured contributions from **H.E. Saurabh Kumar**, Ambassador of India to the EU, Belgium and Luxembourg, as well as **Stefano Palmieri**, president of the EESC's External Relations Section.

Attendees enjoyed vibrant dance performances of *bharatanatyam* and *kathak*, followed by a networking reception with Indian cuisine and a screening of the acclaimed film *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (You Only Live Once).

The evening was part of ongoing efforts to deepen the EU-India strategic partnership through cultural diplomacy, reflecting priorities set out in the EESC's March 2025 opinion and the recent EU-India summit. By bringing together EESC members, diplomats and staff, the event showcased the role of culture in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. The high level of engagement and participation highlighted a growing enthusiasm for cultural exchange as a driver of international cooperation.

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## NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



## UNBROKEN: EUROPE'S SHARED DESTINY WITH UKRAINE

By **Sandra Parthie**, president of the Employers' Group

This month marks four years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began: four years of devastation, but also of courage, resistance and unbroken resolve. What began as an attempt to erase a sovereign nation has become a defining test of Europe's unity and our shared commitment to peace, freedom and democracy.

From day one, Europe has stood by Ukraine. Financial and military support have kept institutions functioning, services running and the economy alive under relentless attack. Opening the EU single market to Ukrainian goods and services has been one of our strongest acts of solidarity, keeping trade flowing, supporting jobs and helping Ukrainian companies plug into EU value chains. Recovery begins with partnership, and Ukraine's future lies with the European family.

This partnership is built not only by institutions, but also by people. In the aftermath of the invasion, the Employers' Group quickly engaged with Ukrainian business partners, showing that reconstruction happens employer to employer, business to business, society to society. These relationships of trust will drive Ukraine's integration and recovery.

Four years on, solidarity is essential, but not enough. Europe must work more actively for a credible, lasting peace because political predictability and security are the foundations on which reconstruction and private investment can truly thrive. Fully implementing the Ukraine Facility, especially its investment pillar, will be crucial to mobilising finance and opening new opportunities for public and private partners. At the same time, integrating Ukraine's energy market with the EU through investment in grid connections and cross-border capacity will support industrial recovery and boost Europe's energy security.

As we continue this work, we must reaffirm our unwavering support for Ukraine's path to EU membership. The European Economic and Social Committee was the first EU institution to endorse this goal, and we stand by it today with the same conviction. Ukraine belongs in the European Union, politically, economically and in spirit. The courage of the Ukrainian people reminds us that when freedom is defended together, it not only endures, it grows stronger.



## FOUR YEARS AFTER RUSSIA'S INVASION, UKRAINE ENDURES AND LOOKS AHEAD

By the EESC Workers' Group

**As the continent enters the [fourth year of what was meant to be Vladimir Putin's 'three-day special military operation'](#) to overthrow the Ukrainian government, nullify Ukraine's independence and ensure its return as a vassal state, the war rages on. Between half a million and 1.5 million people have been killed or injured, vast areas of land have become unusable and entire cities lie in ruins. For four years, Ukrainians have valiantly fought against a numerically superior enemy, enduring war crimes, constant attacks on civilians and blackouts in the depths of winter.**

The continuation of the war raises difficult questions about the future. With U.S. support dwindling in recent years, fuelled by the Trump administration's worldview centred on spheres of influence, Europe has become Ukraine's main backer. Given Ukraine's role as the frontline of European security, this support is driven not by charity, but by Europe's existential need.

At the same time, Chinese support and Russia's autarkic economy have blunted the impact of Western sanctions. Putin's continued strategy of 'feeling forward' (driven largely by the lack of viable alternatives) is turning Russia into a Chinese economic vassal ([even though the enmity between the two should not be underestimated](#)). Russia, for its part, accuses the EU of obstructing 'peace' (which in practice would mean Ukrainian capitulation), and [promises 'no more wars'](#) if Russia and its interests are respected. This is hardly reassuring, as Russia's interests tend to include entire or large parts of its neighbouring states, some of them within the European Union.

Moreover, Russia's war economy provides [little incentive for a return to peace now](#) that its military is fully mobilised, while [Trump's own 'special military operations' legitimise Russia's actions in what it considers its backyard](#). At the same time, although Ukraine has fought admirably against overwhelming odds, Western support has too often been sufficient only to keep it in the fight, but not enough to enable victory.

Despite all the geopolitical considerations, the war continues unabated and people are still dying. Ukraine must press forward on its EU accession path, and this should also prompt the EU to rethink both the accession process and its internal decision-making procedures. In a world shaped by strongmen, raw power and spheres of influence, the EU must stand its ground and show there is another way, and that there is hope for normal countries to survive without becoming vassals of larger powers.

Securing a sovereign and independent future for Ukraine is central to this vision. Only by doing so can the EU use its influence to improve people's lives within Ukraine itself, strengthening civil and social dialogue, supporting social partners and protecting fundamental rights. Although sometimes called into question during wartime, social dialogue and collective bargaining remain essential to societal peace and strength. They play a key role in mobilising social forces within the country and ensuring support for the country's defence efforts.



## INTENSIFIED DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS FOR A PEACE AGREEMENT FOR UKRAINE

By **Ewa Kulik-Bielinska**, member of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group and the EESC [EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform](#)

Late 2025 and early 2026 witnessed a marked acceleration in diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the nearly four-year full-scale war in Ukraine. While the November [US-Russia 28-point peace plan](#), widely perceived as heavily favouring Russia and disadvantaging Ukraine, initially cast a shadow, December brought a surprisingly positive shift. The original plan was superseded by a [revised 20-point proposal](#), developed by the Ukrainian government in collaboration with its European partners, offering a pathway towards a just and lasting peace, grounded in the principles of the [United Nations Charter](#).

### **High-level diplomatic engagement and negotiations**

A flurry of high-level talks ensued: discussions between European leaders in Berlin (15 December) and a meeting between the Ukrainian and US presidents at Mar-a-Lago, followed by a videoconference with European leaders (29 December), consultations with national security advisors and chiefs of staff in Kyiv (3-5 January) and finally a pivotal meeting in Paris (6 January) between the leaders of the coalition of the willing and representatives of the Ukrainian and US administrations. These intense negotiations resulted in an agreement on the core elements of a peace framework, including – crucially for Ukraine – robust security guarantees, to be activated upon the implementation of a ceasefire.

### **The Paris Declaration and European commitments**

The 35 signatories of the [Paris Declaration](#) affirmed that '[Ukraine's ability to defend itself is critically important for ensuring the future of Ukraine's and Euro-Atlantic collective security](#)', and pledged to:

1. monitor and verify the ceasefire, under the oversight of the United States;
2. provide sustained long-term military and technical support to the Ukrainian army;
3. respond decisively to any further hostile actions by Russia;
4. deploy international forces to assist Ukraine in maintaining security (including border protection) and stabilising the region following the ceasefire; and
5. engage in enduring defence cooperation with Kyiv.

In parallel, at its meeting on 18-19 December, the European Council demonstrated its unwavering determination to support Ukraine's military efforts. Citing the 'enhanced cooperation' provisions of [Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union](#), the Council pledged to provide a [EUR 90 billion aid package](#), to be financed through EU borrowing on capital markets. The loan would cover two thirds of Ukraine's military and budgetary needs for 2026 and 2027 and would be repaid once Ukraine receives reparations from Russia.

Prior to this, on 12 December, the European Council resolved to freeze the assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation indefinitely until Russia stops the war and pays due reparations to Ukraine. This unprecedented decision was made under [Article 122\(1\) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#), which requires a qualified majority rather than unanimity – a smart way to strip the countries sceptical about supporting Ukraine (particularly Hungary) of the ability to use their veto power to extract concessions on other matters.

## **Obstacles to peace and the broader implications**

The agreement forged within the Ukraine-US-Europe triangle represents a significant step towards a peace process, bolstering Ukraine's negotiating leverage. However, achieving peace still hinges on the will of the aggressor, Russia, which continues to escalate attacks on critical infrastructure and residential areas, killing civilians and depriving millions of electricity, heat and water. Russia's territorial demands, its opposition to any military presence of NATO countries in Ukraine and its refusal to agree to a ceasefire do not inspire optimism. Sustained pressure on Russia therefore remains imperative.

Participants in the [EESC EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform](#) (CSP) urged the EU to take action, particularly by adopting the [20th sanctions package](#). Their [declaration](#), published on 11 December, calls for all Russian banks to be targeted without exception and for a complete cessation of imports of oil, gas and oil products from the Russian Federation, including deliveries via pipelines or shipments via non-EU countries.

Achieving peace on the terms outlined in the 20-point plan, supplemented by the Paris security guarantees, would signify a triumph of democratic principles over aggressive, authoritarian imperialism. It would send a strong message that aggression and violations of international law will not be tolerated, helping to deter future conflicts and uphold the rules-based international order.

The immediate practical implications for Europe would be enhanced security, stabilised energy and commodity prices and reduced border and economic tensions. Politically, a successful peace process involving European diplomacy would further strengthen European solidarity and enhance Europe's role as a global actor. Crucially, it would offer millions of refugees and internally displaced Ukrainians the prospect of returning home to reunite with their families and engage in reconstruction and recovery efforts supported by the international community. A lasting peace would pave the way for Ukraine's closer integration into the EU and eventual membership, bringing significant economic and political benefits.

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## **IN FOCUS: MARKING FOUR YEARS SINCE RUSSIA'S ILLEGAL, FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE**



## PEOPLE IN THE EU DO NOT HAVE THE LUXURY OF NOT CARING ABOUT JUSTICE

**Today, justice must be understood not as a privilege of victors, but as a human right. Few people argue this more forcefully than Ukrainian human rights lawyer Oleksandra Matviichuk, who has received the Nobel Peace Prize for the work of her organisation, the [Center for Civil Liberties \(CCL\)](#). They have documented nearly 100 000 Russian war crimes since the full-scale invasion began. In our interview, she explains why accountability cannot wait for the end of the war and what justice must mean for Europe today.**

**What is your estimate of the number of war crimes committed by Russians in Ukraine since the onset of war? How are you collecting data on these crimes?**

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, we have united efforts with dozens of organisations from different regions. We have created a national network of documentarians covering the entire country, including the occupied regions. Working together, we have documented more than 97 000 incidents of war crimes. And this is only the tip of the iceberg, because Russia uses war crimes as a method of warfare. And while this war turns people into numbers, we are giving people back their names.

**With the evolution of modern warfare, including hybrid attacks and propaganda that fuels or incites aggression, should the definition of what constitutes a war crime or a crime against humanity be revisited? For instance, we are now witnessing Russia's targeted shelling of energy infrastructure, leaving people freezing in their homes during one of Ukraine's harshest winters - can this qualify as a war crime or crime against humanity?**

People only begin to understand that there is a war going on when bombs are falling on their heads. But war does not only have a military dimension. There is also an informational one that knows no borders. This dimension aims to destroy trust between people and their connection to reality, thereby undermining the country's ability to resist future invasions. We see how Russians are working in EU countries through propaganda and disinformation, and, unfortunately, they face almost no counteraction.

When it comes to the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, which has left millions of people with limited access or no access at all to heating, electricity and water during sub-zero temperatures, these are crimes against humanity, because it pushes people to the brink of survival. This is how the International Criminal Court classified these actions when it opened a second criminal case based on these facts.

**What kind of international tribunal do you envisage? More broadly, how can we preserve the legacy of the Nuremberg Trials in the 21st century, as international law confronts newer forms of harm such as aggression-driven propaganda or the destruction of civilian energy infrastructure?**

If we want to prevent aggressive wars in the future, we must hold those who start aggressive wars in the present accountable. It sounds quite logical, but in the entire history of humanity, there has been only one precedent for punishment for the crime of aggression, and that was the Nuremberg Tribunal. All other international tribunals you have heard of, to simplify somewhat, tried people for killing each other, not according to the norms of international law. We need to take aggressive warfare outside the legal framework of what is permissible.

The Nuremberg Tribunal was a significant step towards justice in the last century. But it also established an unwritten rule that justice is the privilege of the victors, because it was a court that punished criminals whose regime had fallen. But we live in a new century, and justice is not a privilege, but a human right. So our task is to make justice independent of how and when the war ends. That is why, frankly speaking, I do not understand the EU countries' delay in joining the special tribunal on aggression.

**Considering the political direction of the USA under President Trump, an international tribunal for Putin and other Russian warlords might seem unlikely. How important is the restoration of justice, not only for the victims of war crimes, but for all Ukrainians?**

Yes, justice is clearly not a priority for the Trump administration. And we are unlikely to find any hints of punishment for Russian war crimes in the draft peace agreement. Therefore, our task is to put justice on a separate international track. Let me explain - the International Criminal Court does not care what will be written in the next peace agreement with Russia. The court will not stop the proceedings or revoke the arrest warrants. So our task is to launch several more such accountability mechanisms as soon as possible, in particular, the special tribunal on aggression, which I have already mentioned. And among them, I will mention separately the reparations loan, because justice has a financial side.

**In 2022 you won the Nobel Peace Prize. How has this recognition tangibly helped your work?**

We live in a world shaped by decisions made by politicians ten or twenty years ago. Back then, human rights defenders were not heard. We argued that a country that systematically violates human rights poses a threat not only to its own citizens, but also to peace and security as a whole. Russia was a prime example. But politicians of the past continued to shake hands with Putin, do business as usual, and build gas pipelines. They made their decisions based solely on economic expediency, geopolitical interests and the electoral prospects of their own party, and they completely ignored human rights and freedoms. But if you want the future here and now, like on a credit card, sooner or later you will still have to pay back the loan with interest. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened. And the Nobel Peace Prize made the voice of human rights defenders more visible.

**Do you feel that Ukraine has been let down by the international community as war crimes continue with impunity and no end in sight?**

Let me put it this way: people living in the European Union do not have the luxury of growing tired of this war and not caring about justice, about putting an end to the impunity of Russian actions in Chechnya, Moldova, Georgia, Syria, Libya, and other countries around the world. Because they will be next. Putin did not start this war in order to seize another part of Ukrainian territory. He started this war to occupy the entire country and go further. He sees Ukraine as a bridge to Europe. His logic is historical. He dreams of restoring the Russian empire with its influence on the European continent. So people in European countries live in safety only because Ukrainians have acted as a shield, preventing the Russian army from moving forward.

**Oleksandra Matviichuk** is a Ukrainian human rights lawyer who has been defending freedom and human dignity in the OSCE region. In 2022, she received the Nobel Peace Prize for the work of her organisation, [the Center for Civil Liberties](#). During the Revolution of Dignity, Oleksandra initiated the Euromaidan SOS initiative to protect persecuted protesters. Since 2014, she has focused her efforts on documenting war crimes in Crimea and Donbas, as well as fighting for the release of civilians illegally detained by Russia. Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Oleksandra co-founded the 'Tribunal for Putin' initiative, which has documented tens of thousands of war crimes to hold the aggressor accountable. She is a leading global voice advocating the creation of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression.



## UKRAINE'S STOLEN CHILDREN: EVERY CHILD RETURNED IS AN INVESTMENT IN GLOBAL SECURITY AND STABILITY

An integral part of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's *Bring Kids Back UA* initiative, [Save Ukraine](#) is the leading organisation working to rescue the stolen Ukrainian children from Russia and temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Placed in institutions or in foster families, the abducted children face isolation, indoctrination and militarisation. Russia no longer hides its crimes - last summer, the team uncovered a catalogue of abducted Ukrainian children advertised for adoption, detailing their physical characteristics or describing them as obedient or hardworking. And the clock is ticking: the longer children remain in Russia's adoption system, the harder it will be to bring them home. Save Ukraine's Alina Dmytrenko told us more.

**You are the NGO that has returned the largest number of deported Ukrainian children, having so far rescued and brought back to Ukraine over 1000 children abducted by Russia since 2022. From what you see in your work, what is life like for the children who have not been brought home? Do you have a sense of how many abducted children may still be in Russia or Russian-controlled territories?**

To date, [Save Ukraine](#) has rescued 1146 children, representing the majority of documented rescues. Last year alone, we brought back 500, and this year we aim to return 1000 more.

However, the scale of the crime is staggering. Since 2014 – and especially after February 2022 – over 1.6 million Ukrainian children's lives have been stolen as they remain trapped under occupation or have been abducted to Russia. As of 2023, Ukraine has officially tracked only 19 546 cases of abduction due to Russia's near-total information blockade that severely limits access to data. Meanwhile, in 2023, Russian authorities themselves reported that over 700 000 Ukrainian children had been officially registered in Russia – suggesting that the true scale of abduction is exponentially higher.

The situation for Ukrainian children in Russia and occupied territories is dire. They face indoctrination, militarisation and forced placement in institutions or Russian families, often with changed identities. Many have lost contact with their parents, who have been killed, detained or disappeared. And time is working against us. The longer they remain there, the harder it becomes to bring them home. The children we rescue describe fear, pressure and isolation – and say that only after returning to Ukraine do they finally feel safe and free again. That is why we remain fully committed to bringing as many children home as possible.

**There have been reports that some deported Ukrainian children are entered into Russian adoption or guardianship systems. Have you encountered this in your work, and what does it mean for the children involved?**

Yes, many Ukrainian children have been placed in Russian foster families or institutions. In many cases, they still have parents or relatives in Ukraine ready to take them back. Instead of facilitating reunification, Russia blocks contact and has created incentives for Russian families to adopt Ukrainian children – increasing financial payments and simplifying procedures to change citizenship, names, birthdates and other personal data, making children harder to identify and trace. We personally remain in contact with parents who are trying to reach children held in institutions or families without any access to communication.

Save Ukraine has rescued children both from institutions and from foster families, but once a child is fully absorbed into the Russian adoption system, return becomes extremely difficult. We have documented numerous cases where teenagers, upon turning 18, have attempted to escape the institutions or foster families on their own. There are also cases where foster families abandon children once state payments end. You can imagine that the psychological damage is severe – especially for children who know they have a real family in Ukraine.

What is especially horrifying is that for very young children taken during infancy – including those abducted from baby homes like the one in Kherson – the tragedy may be permanent. After years in Russian families with altered identities, some may never learn they are Ukrainian.

Last summer, our team uncovered an online catalogue listing Ukrainian children from a Russian-run institution in the occupied Luhansk region. The format resembled a marketplace: children were described in terms such as ‘obedient’ and ‘hardworking’, and could be filtered by physical traits like eye and hair color. The images were explicit and deeply disturbing. In Russia – a country where corruption is widespread and systemic – such exposure creates real risks of exploitation and trafficking. This case revealed a system that treats the most vulnerable Ukrainian children as commodities.

This isn’t a new tactic, however. Since 2014, Ukrainian children have appeared in Russian adoption databases. However, since 2022, the practice has become widespread and systematic. Initially, Russian authorities tried to cover their tracks – shutting down registries and erasing references. Now, the pretense is gone. The official website of the so-called ‘ministry’ of the Luhansk occupation administration brazenly displays this data for all to see.

**Can you walk us through how a rescue mission to bring a stolen Ukrainian child home actually works?**

Of course, for security reasons, we cannot disclose operational details, as these are complex, high-risk missions. But what we can share is that we have built a full-cycle rescue system: identifying children, establishing secure communication, verifying their circumstances and carefully planning every step of the

extraction process. Because Russia blocks access to information inside the occupied territories, the most effective channel for connecting with families and children is often word of mouth. Those we successfully rescue help us reach those still trapped. Strategic communication, therefore, becomes a lifeline.

Each journey is long and dangerous – often from occupied territories through Russia and Belarus to the Ukrainian border, where our team welcomes the children and immediately provides protection and care. Russian authorities heavily screen and interrogate those attempting to leave, and restrictions are increasing constantly, so we adapt each time, prioritising safety above all else.

When children cross back into Ukraine, almost all of them say the same thing: they can finally breathe. They feel free. And for the first time in a long while, they allow themselves to dream again.

### **What happens after a child returns – how does Save Ukraine support their psychological recovery and reintegration with family, school and community?**

After a child returns to Ukraine, Save Ukraine is responsible for the full recovery process. This is often long-term. Many children have lived under constant pressure, surveillance and psychological control. The first step is restoring a sense of safety – and helping them reclaim their identity, voice and agency.

We provide holistic support: temporary accommodation, humanitarian assistance, legal aid and trauma-informed psychological care. Just as importantly, we support reintegration – enrolling children back in school or university, helping families access employment and assisting them in rebuilding stable, independent lives. For orphans, we carefully look for loving foster families, so that no child is placed in an institution. Rescue is only the beginning. Real recovery takes time, consistency and care – and we stay with children and families throughout that process.

### **How can people support your work?**

People can support our work through [our website](#), by sharing the stories of rescued children and by helping us expand our network of partners and supporters.

Right now, we are running a major emergency fundraising campaign to help children and families in Kyiv survive the humanitarian crisis caused by massive attacks on our energy infrastructure, leaving tens of thousands without electricity and heating. Our goal is to keep our centres functioning as safe, heated hubs – providing light, hot meals and shelter for children during air raids and prolonged blackouts. [Link to fundraiser](#)

We are grateful for any contribution – large or small – and we remain open to diverse forms of cooperation to pursue and scale up our mission.

### **What do you wish the international community understood better about the deportation of Ukrainian children, and what concrete actions could make the biggest difference right now?**

It is becoming increasingly clear – not only to us, but to the wider international community – that the issue of Ukrainian children is not just a humanitarian tragedy. Given the system Russia has built, it has become a matter of regional and global security.

Through indoctrination and militarisation, Ukrainian children are being taught to reject their identity and to view the West – Europe, NATO, the United States – as enemies. All are being prepared for military service.

This is not only about Ukraine's future; it is about the long-term security of the democratic world.

Europe and the international community must treat this with the seriousness it deserves. Every child returned is an investment in global security and stability.

We see clearly that Russia is not willing to return our children and that diplomacy alone has not created a functioning return mechanism. That is why we call on international partners to help strengthen and scale the rescue system that is already working – so that we can increase our capacity and bring more children home.

**Alina Dmytrenko** brings extensive experience working with the Parliament of Ukraine and European parliamentarians. She currently leads government and European affairs at Save Ukraine, advancing the issue of stolen Ukrainian children and mobilising support for their rescue among EU governments and national parliaments.



## UKRAINIAN POPULATION MAY BE FREEZING BUT THERE IS NO MOOD OF SURRENDER

**The financial cost of the damage caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine's energy sector is counted in tens of billions of US dollars. No price can be put on human suffering though - Ukrainians are freezing in the dark in their own homes. This is a quiet humanitarian catastrophe, but Russia is not succeeding in breaking our morale, says Nataliia Fiebrig, co-founder and director of Ukraine2Power, an NGO helping communities build energy independence and delivering emergency support to people in need.**

### **How does Ukraine2Power support people and institutions in emergency situations?**

Since the first days of the full-scale invasion, Russia has been using energy as a weapon against civilians. This winter has been especially hard. In parts of Kyiv, heating is completely gone and will not return this season. Whole high-rise districts are freezing, and elevators are not working. Many people, especially the elderly, people who are sick and families with small children, cannot easily leave their apartments. Those who suffer the most are people with disabilities and those who have nowhere else to go.

Ukraine2Power was not created as an emergency relief organisation. Since 2023, our work has focused first on delivering German-made mobile charging systems and later on long-term solutions: helping communities build energy independence by installing solar power and battery systems for schools, hospitals, kindergartens and other public institutions. We believed in sustainable help. We also never expected that,

after four years of war, ordinary people would still be ready to support emergency aid.

But when the situation in Kyiv became this critical, we understood that we simply could not stand aside.

For the first time, we started providing direct emergency support to people in their homes. We prepare aid packages based on real needs. In buildings where heating will not return but electricity is partially available, we buy electric blankets so people can stay warm at night. In buildings without gas, we provide camping gas stoves with cartridges, warm sleeping bags and thermal items. Each package costs around EUR 80 and is put together with one simple question in mind: what would help us survive in this situation ourselves?

At the same time, we continue supporting institutions, because hospitals, schools and kindergartens must keep working even during blackouts. This winter, we are doing both: emergency help for people and long-term energy solutions for communities.

Our team lives in Kyiv and shares the same circumstances.

### **What is the current capacity for repairing damaged energy infrastructure?**

Ukraine's repair capacity is stretched on two fronts: money and equipment/people. Technically, Ukrainian utilities and repair crews have become extremely fast at emergency fixes and 'keeping the system running,' but they are constrained by shortages of critical hardware (especially high-voltage equipment like transformers, breakers and substation components) and by the reality that repairs often have to be done under repeated attack, in freezing temperatures and sometimes with limited access to sites.

International support remains crucial for three reasons. First, replacement equipment for high-voltage grids and large thermal generation is expensive and often has long lead times. Second, large rebuilds require stable financing that cannot be recovered through tariffs in the short term, especially in wartime conditions. Third, even when technical teams are available, sustained attacks and security constraints make 'normal' reconstruction planning impossible without external procurement channels, donor funding and coordination.

One good illustration of this challenge is the Darnytska Combined Heat and Power Plant (CHP) in Kyiv, which has been essentially destroyed. Restoring this site is not a matter of routine repair. A realistic recovery scenario based on modern cogeneration would require approximately EUR 100-120 million, covering new generation equipment, grid connection and mandatory physical protection measures.

### **Are there official estimates for the damage done to Ukraine's energy infrastructure?**

According to the joint Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA4) by the Government of Ukraine, the World Bank, the European Commission and the United Nations, direct damage to Ukraine's energy sector is estimated at approximately USD 20.5 billion as of the end of 2024, including more than USD 2.5 billion in losses in district heating alone.

In practice, actual costs are significantly higher, as many assets are not merely damaged but functionally destroyed, requiring full reconstruction rather than repair. Recurrent strikes also multiply costs by repeatedly undoing emergency fixes.

### **To what extent does the continued insecurity of energy infrastructure affect civilian morale and everyday life?**

People are exhausted, especially elderly people and others in vulnerable situations. Cold, darkness and constant uncertainty take a heavy toll. When we deliver aid, we are met with real gratitude, but also with very visible exhaustion. For many people, simply staying warm has become a daily challenge.

At the same time, life in Kyiv goes on. The city continues to function. There is no panic buying, people try to do their work, often wearing winter clothes indoors. Daily life depends heavily on generators, but they are under enormous strain and fuel is very expensive.

This is a quiet humanitarian catastrophe. Yet there is no mood of surrender. Neighbours support one another, meet in their buildings and courtyards, share hot drinks, listen to music and try to keep their spirits up.

This is important because Russia is trying to break civilian morale by targeting energy infrastructure and forcing people to give up. That goal has not been achieved. At the same time, many vulnerable people cannot cope on their own, and support for them is critical to help them get through the winter.

### **Looking beyond emergency backup power, how do you see your organisation's role in supporting Ukraine's long-term energy transition and resilience?**

Our organisation focuses on long-term energy security, resilience and efficiency for Ukrainian communities.

We support communities in building solar power plants and battery storage systems for social infrastructure, such as schools, kindergartens, hospitals and municipal facilities. Many communities initially rely almost exclusively on generators. Many do not fully see the value of renewable and storage technologies. Generators, however, are an emergency solution, not a stable or sustainable one. They are expensive to run, difficult to maintain and unsuitable for long-term resilience.

What Ukraine needs is solutions that will work for many years to come. That is why we help communities with financing, manage projects from planning to implementation, and ensure that systems are designed for real local needs. At the same time, we deliberately involve communities in co-financing and decision making. This is essential so that local authorities and institutions truly understand the benefits, take ownership of the systems, and gain the capacity to implement similar projects independently in the future.

### **How can our readers support your work?**

It is crucial to understand that the war has not ended and that civilian suffering is still enormous. Russian forces continue to kill Ukrainian families, deliberately destroy energy infrastructure, and use cold and darkness as weapons against civilians. Speaking about this reality and sharing information is essential. It helps keep attention on what is happening and prevents the normalisation of suffering.

Those who want to help directly can support with donations, especially to sustainable, long-term projects that will strengthen communities for years to come, not only emergency responses. These projects will help people survive not just this winter, but future ones as well.

Finally, readers should understand that this situation exists because Ukraine has not been able to fully protect itself. There has not been enough air defence or enough weapons to stop these attacks. Russia is committing war crimes, and accountability must follow. Readers can raise their voices with their elected representatives, urging them to increase the cost for Russia through stronger sanctions, military support and courageous political decisions. Europe is stronger than it often believes, and its choices matter.

**Nataliia Fiebrig** is a Ukrainian civic activist and international journalist based in Berlin. She is the co-founder and director of Ukraine2Power, a Ukrainian NGO working with Ukrainian communities to strengthen energy security and long-term resilience through sustainable solutions for social infrastructure.

If you want to help the important work Ukraine2Power is doing to alleviate the suffering of the Ukrainian population, you can [make a donation here](#).

If you are based in Germany, you can make a donation through Ukraine2Power's German partner organisation [WE AID](#) (IBAN: DE52 3702 0500 0001 8388 01, Reference: Ukraine2Power).



## UKRAINE'S EU PATH: A TRANSFORMATION FOR EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY

**The Director of the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, Nadija Afanasieva, reflects on Ukraine's path towards EU membership. She serves as an enlargement candidate member (ECM) at the European Economic and Social Committee.**

When discussing Ukraine's EU accession, the debate often centres on negotiation chapters, legislative alignment and compliance with the *acquis*. However, for those working inside the process, the story is broader and more deeply human. In December 2023, the European

Council formally opened accession negotiations with Ukraine, with bilateral screening across 33 chapters of EU law now underway- a major institutional milestone.

But anyone following the process understands that accession is far more than a technical checklist.

For Ukraine, European integration has evolved into a profound societal transformation unfolding under extraordinary conditions. Since receiving candidate status in 2022, in the midst of a full-scale invasion, the country has continued to advance reforms in judicial governance, anti-corruption institutions, media regulation and minority rights. Progress under such pressure is unprecedented in the history of EU enlargement.

Over the past decade, Ukraine's civil society has not simply observed reform – it has often driven it, especially in moments when institutional momentum has been fragile. Since 2014, decentralisation, anti corruption and public administration reforms have been shaped, monitored and defended by civic actors. Today, this involvement is more structured: NGOs, think tanks and business associations participate in thematic working and advisory groups set up by ministries to prepare negotiation positions under specific chapters. Civic experts review legislation, provide analysis and monitor implementation.

European integration is increasingly a shared responsibility rather than a closed governmental process. This is crucial because EU membership is not only about adopting laws – it is about functioning within a system built on multilevel governance and cohesion policy. Decentralisation reforms illustrate this clearly. Since 2014, more than 1 470 amalgamated territorial communities have been established, significantly increasing

local fiscal autonomy. Between 2014 and 2021, local budget revenues rose more than threefold.

Equally important, local civil society organisations now act as partners in community development, participatory planning and oversight of public spending. Across many regions, NGOs help municipalities prepare strategies, engage stakeholders and align local priorities with national and European frameworks. In practice, effective decentralisation depends not only on empowered local authorities but on communities that feel ownership of change. This partnership forms the practical foundation for managing future EU cohesion funds in line with the partnership principle.

Economic integration is also well advanced. The EU now accounts for roughly 55–60% of Ukraine's trade in goods, compared with less than 30% in 2013 – a dramatic structural shift long preceding formal accession.

At the same time, Ukraine is negotiating accession while undertaking the largest reconstruction effort in Europe since the mid-20th century. According to the latest joint Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment by the World Bank, the European Commission and the United Nations, reconstruction needs exceed USD 400 billion and continue to grow following recent attacks on energy infrastructure. Reconstruction is not only about rebuilding infrastructure – it is about restoring trust, institutions and confidence in the future. It demands clarity about the economic and governance model Ukraine will bring into the EU. If investments prioritise productivity, the green transition, digital innovation and regional resilience, they can accelerate convergence; if fragmented, they risk entrenching weaknesses.

The EU's EUR 50 billion Ukraine Facility for 2024–2027 reinforces the link between recovery and reform by tying assistance to governance benchmarks and reform milestones. Enlargement is already shaping Ukraine's institutional trajectory.

Ukraine's accession also unfolds within a broader enlargement agenda involving Moldova, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia. Enlargement today requires adaptation not only from candidate countries but also from the EU's institutional and budgetary architecture.

A particularly important bridge between Ukrainian civil society and the EU institutions is the EESC's enlargement candidate member (ECM) framework. Since 2022, Ukrainian representatives have participated in advisory discussions within the Committee, gaining early exposure to EU procedures and structured social dialogue. While ECMs do not have voting rights, the mechanism is an essential preparatory step toward full membership.

Civil society and social partners also take part in sectoral negotiation groups established by ministries to support the screening process and the development of negotiating frameworks. These groups assess legislative gaps, analyse implementation capacity and provide policy recommendations, ensuring that preparations reflect both technical requirements and wider societal needs.

Public attitudes toward EU integration have transformed dramatically. In 2013, support stood at about 40–45%. After 2022, it rose to around 80–85% in national surveys. More than 4 million Ukrainians have gained temporary protection in EU Member States, acquiring firsthand experiences with European labour markets, education systems and social services. Europe is no longer an abstract aspiration – it is lived daily in classrooms, workplaces and neighbourhoods across the continent.

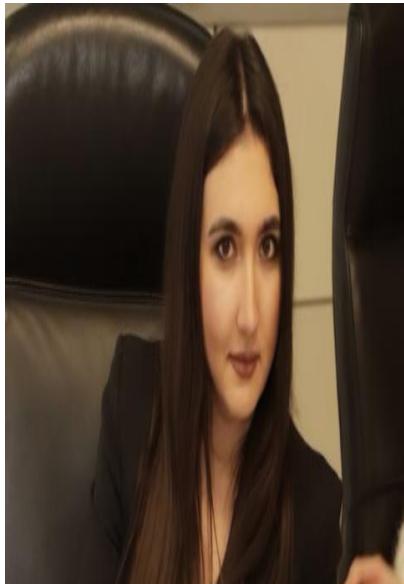
How close is Ukraine to membership? Politically, progress has been remarkable despite wartime conditions. Institutionally, the work ahead remains demanding: rule of law implementation, judicial independence, anti-

corruption enforcement and the administrative capacity to manage EU funds at scale will be decisive.

However, enlargement is no longer a distant prospect. Through civic participation in negotiation preparations, decentralisation reform, trade integration, reconstruction aligned with EU standards and engagement in formats such as the ECM framework, integration is already taking shape. The next step should be deeper, more systematic cooperation between Ukrainian civil society and the EU institutions, particularly within the EESC. Building joint initiatives and sustained platforms for cooperation between civil societies in Member States and candidate countries can transform enlargement into a shared civic endeavour, strengthening participation, accountability and resilience across the Union.

If this collaborative approach continues, Ukraine's accession will not only formalise its place in Europe – it will demonstrate that enlargement can strengthen the Union from within by connecting civil societies more closely and making Europe more resilient, participatory and united.

**Nadija Afanasieva** is the Director of the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics (Kyiv, Ukraine) and serves as an enlargement candidate member (ECM) at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and member of the EU-Ukraine CSP. She has extensive experience in EU enlargement, regional policy and smart specialisation, contributing to institutional dialogue between Ukrainian stakeholders and European institutions.



## EESC'S UKRAINE HUB – WHERE UKRAINIAN EXPERTISE MEETS EUROPEAN PARTNERS

**Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the EESC's Ukraine Hub has offered Ukrainian civil society organisations a dedicated space to work, connect and host small-scale events in Brussels. Among its users is Ukrainian Prism, one of the country's leading think tanks specialising in foreign policy and international security. Prism representative, Mariia Korban, told us about the organisation's mission and described how the Hub has enabled them to contribute directly to the European conversation on Ukraine at the heart of EU policymaking.**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) established the Ukraine Hub in April 2022, two months after Russia launched its massive assault on the country. The Hub was set up as a concrete form of support, providing office space for Ukrainian civil society organisations (CSOs). The initiative quickly expanded when the Committee of the Regions invited Ukrainian local and regional authorities (LRAs) to join.

Since September 2022, the Hub has been based in the former VIP restaurant of the EESC's Van Maerlant building. In 2023, Hub organisations were authorised to host small-scale events, and around 30 such events have taken place to date, bringing together nearly 1 000 participants. The EESC also provides logistical

support to Hub users, including printing services and access to network equipment in the VMA building.

Among the Hub's users is [Ukrainian Prism](#), the Foreign Policy Council contributing Ukrainian expertise on foreign policy and security to European debates. We spoke with Prism representative, Mariia Korban, who outlined the organisation's work and explained what cooperation with the EESC means in practice.

**Since opening your Brussels office in 2023, you have been very active. Could you briefly explain what Ukrainian Prism is and highlight some of the key activities or achievements you are most proud of?**

Ukrainian Prism is a Kyiv-based think tank specialising in Ukraine's foreign policy and international security. Through ten research programmes, we work on the regions and policy areas that shape Ukraine's role in the world.

For us, expertise is not knowledge for its own sake, but a contribution to shared decisions. This is why, in early 2023, we opened an office in Brussels – not to observe European policymaking from the outside, but to take an active part in European processes and to ensure the consistent integration of Ukrainian expertise into the European dialogue.

Since then, we have organised or co-organised 70 expert events in Brussels and across EU capitals, bringing together more than 3 000 participants from diplomacy, EU institutions, policy analysis, media and civil society. These events were designed to foster substantive and informed dialogue between Ukraine and its European partners.

In parallel, we coordinate four regional expert forums with Southern Europe, the Nordic-Baltic Eight, the Weimar Triangle and the Benelux countries, helping to strengthen mutual understanding and trust across Europe.

**The EESC Ukraine Hub seems to be an important partner for your organisation. What does this cooperation offer in practical terms?**

For Ukrainian Prism, the Ukraine Hub at the European Economic and Social Committee has become a genuine institutional anchor in Brussels.

By hosting us within its premises, the EESC has given us the opportunity to work at the very heart of the European institutional landscape – not as guests, but as partners in a shared European conversation on Ukraine. This proximity enables continuous engagement and lays the foundation for long-term, trust-based cooperation.

The Ukraine Hub also provides a stable platform for regular interaction between Ukrainian expertise and European stakeholders, while supporting the inclusion of a broader range of Ukrainian experts and civil society representatives in the Brussels dialogue. In this way, institutional support is translated into tangible and lasting impact.

**Your organisation celebrated its 10th anniversary at the end of 2025. What are the main priorities for the next stage of Ukrainian Prism's work?**

Ten years is not a conclusion – it is a responsibility.

Our main priority is to do everything possible to help bring peace and victory to our country and to ensure a secure and sustainable future for Ukraine. With this understanding, we are focused on further embedding Ukrainian expertise into European strategic discussions on security, enlargement and Europe's long-term resilience - as a credible and well-informed partner.

We will continue to deepen cooperation with EU institutions, Member States and think tanks, building on established partnerships and ensuring Ukraine's active and trusted presence in shaping Europe's shared future.

*Mariia Korban is Manager of the Brussels Office of the [Foreign Policy Council Ukrainian Prism](#), with a professional background in diplomacy and international cooperation. Her work focuses on European politics, EU-Ukraine relations, contemporary security challenges and public diplomacy.*



## WE NEED A LONG-TERM PLAN FOR UKRAINIANS STAYING IN THE EU

**Four million Ukrainians are still benefiting from temporary protection in the EU, which grants access to work, education and social rights. The challenge now is to turn a temporary measure into sustainable long-term policies that prevent social tensions and protect labour rights, writes Mateusz Szymański, rapporteur of the opinion [A predictable and common European way forward for Ukrainians in the EU](#).**

**By Mateusz Szymański**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has created a situation that is unprecedented in the history of the European Union: the arrival not of thousands or hundreds of thousands, but of millions of people fleeing war. Thanks to the commitment of Member States and their citizens, the EU

has been able to meet this challenge and provide refugees with safe shelter.

At the same time, the EU took an extremely important decision to grant, for the first time, so-called temporary protection to Ukrainians arriving in the EU. This mechanism enables immediate and collective protection, without the need to assess individual applications, for people unable to return to their country of origin. Its purpose is to harmonise rights across the EU. Employment and education are central pillars of these rights, alongside accommodation, healthcare and social assistance.

It is estimated that more than four million people currently benefit from temporary protection in the EU, most of them in Czechia, Germany and Poland. The majority are women and children. Today, questions about how to approach the long-term stay of Ukrainian refugees are becoming increasingly relevant. There are several issues that need to be discussed. First and foremost, we must prevent rising social tensions and ensure this topic is not misused for political purposes. This is precisely why an open, fact-based public

debate is necessary. Civil society must be at the forefront of such a discussion.

Among the most important challenges are ensuring access to public services and creating the conditions necessary for Ukrainians to participate fully in the labour market. There are many barriers preventing them from finding employment (for example, the requirement to know the host-country language). Unfortunately, cases of unfair employment practices also occur. Additionally, the urgent shortage of housing in many Member States must be addressed, as new arrivals further increase demand.

While these issues concern the situation within the EU, what we need now is a long-term plan for Ukrainians staying here. Any such plan must recognise that some refugees will return home once the situation stabilises and Ukraine becomes safe again. This is why we at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) are emphasising the importance of using frozen Russian funds held in EU banks for reconstruction. These funds should also support socially responsible reforms, particularly in labour market regulation and the fight against corruption. The success of the EU-Ukraine integration process will depend on avoiding social and economic tensions. This can only be achieved if the standards we know within the EU also become part of Ukraine's legal system.

At the same time, we must begin discussing the future now and prepare concrete solutions. Temporary protection cannot last forever. It has already been extended several times, creating uncertainty that, in a sense, contradicts the very idea of temporary protection. Member States should therefore strengthen their administrative capacity and encourage Ukrainians to regularise their stay in the EU already, through means other than temporary protection. Unfortunately, there are worrying signs that administrative procedures are too lengthy and that authorities are not prepared to cope with such a high number of applicants. Hopefully, this will change. Digitalisation seems to offer an opportunity to make the entire process a success.

### **The EESC's recommendations for integrating Ukrainians into the EU**

In line with its core mission, the EESC recommends ways of transforming political decisions into practical solutions. The European Council has already agreed to extend temporary protection until March 2027 and has proposed to open a wider discussion on the long-term future of Ukrainians in the EU. Accordingly, the EESC has put forward its own recommendations for both integration and the eventual return of Ukrainians.

Given its unique insight into local circumstances, the EESC is well positioned to address these issues, hence the EESC's specific recommendations, which concern, among other things, working conditions. On the one hand, we see cases of abuse, which are unacceptable and must be addressed through proper enforcement of the law. On the other hand, many Ukrainians often work below their qualifications, which is also detrimental. Effective mechanisms for recognising qualifications are essential. At yet another level, our [opinion](#) emphasises the importance of being economically active and participating in civil society organisations, including in trade unions, as they effectively defend the rights of Ukrainian workers. This would also help build good relations and trust.

We must also take into account the situation in Ukraine itself. Unfortunately, over the years – and not only during the current Russian war of aggression against Ukraine – there has been far-reaching liberalisation of labour law there. The authorities do not hide their aversion to trade unions and social dialogue. An assessment of these regulations shows that many of them contradict the fundamental International Labour Organization standards. There is no justification for denying workers their rights, which – as is often forgotten – are basic human rights, even in times of war.

There is, however, some room for optimism. A tripartite memorandum on labour law reforms has recently been signed, aimed at bringing Ukrainian regulations closer to international standards. Let us hope this will indeed happen.

The EESC will continue its work in this area, which remains of crucial importance. In addition, several bodies in the EESC are dedicated to cooperation with Ukraine, where this discussion can be continued. Importantly, EESC members remain in contact with Ukrainians living in the EU through their networks. What matters to us is maintaining strong social and interpersonal relations – independent of high-level political dynamics.

*Mateusz Szymański is a member of the EESC's Workers' Group.*



## WE ARE NOT HELPLESS

**After four years of war, the strategy of Ukraine's allies has failed – but Russia is a house built on sand. As the fifth year gets under way, and solidarity among allies is beginning to crumble, Ukraine's only realistic path may lie along the current frontline. But for that to happen, we must recognise that we are not helpless – our societies need to wake up. We must not cave in to Russian propaganda and say that this is not our war. An analysis by Polish journalist and writer Michał Olszewski.**

Every day at 9 a.m., a ritual is repeated across Ukraine: from loudspeakers you can hear a clock strike, passers-by stop, men take off their hats. This is a minute of silence in honour of those killed in the war against Russia. The whole of Ukraine stops for a moment, before going back to fighting heroically again. People go to work, learning takes place face-to-face, children are taken to school, superhuman forces repair Russian-bombed power plants, the dead are taken to the cemetery.

The fifth year of the war begins. A black and white war, a war of good defending itself against evil, an unequal war, a martyr's war. The idea that the world has not supported Ukraine during this time is not true – it has supported it, helping the country to keep going and defend itself against barbarism.

In Kyiv a legitimately elected president is in charge, not a governor from Moscow. At the same time, Ukraine is a victim of the unwritten doctrine of allied states: they provide support while also doing a lot to ensure that Russia is not defeated. Since the war broke out, Kyiv has resembled a boxer coming to the ring with one hand tied behind his back. A country fighting a heroic war of defence was not allowed to use Western arms to attack Russian targets far from the front. Russia bombed Lviv and struck areas bordering Romania and Poland, but Ukrainians were unable to respond in kind. In 2024, when US politicians were discussing aid for [Ukraine](#), part of the country was left without air defences, with bombs, rockets and drones raining down on Ukrainian cities unimpeded. It was at that time that the Russian offensive gained momentum.

Each allied country has pursued its own interests with Russia through intermediaries. Even if these are on a much smaller scale than before 2022, they allow the Russian economy to keep going. Belgium is against using frozen Russian assets, Denmark has not closed the Øresund strait to Russian vessels, Greece has not closed its ports to the shadow fleet, and so on. Donald Trump coming to power in the US, with his absurd and inexplicable penchant for the Russian dictator, has only made Kyiv's situation worse. After all, the US has shown no desire to use the tools that it has to stifle the Russian economy and strengthen Ukraine's army. Instead, they have presented Ukraine with a steep bill for the aid provided so far. Adding to this complex picture are Russia's allies in the European Union, China, which is the big winner of the past four years, and India and Türkiye – trading countries making huge profits from Russia, although officially they have distanced themselves from its criminal activities.

After four years of war, it is clear that the strategy of Ukraine's allies has failed, but it is also clear that Russia is a house built on sand. After four years of war, one of the world's biggest armies has been unable to defeat Ukraine.

From this perspective, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's embittered speech in Davos should come as no surprise. A carefully staged gesture revealed a level of disappointment not seen since the start of the war. The Ukrainian delegation could see how the war with Russia was receding into the background, sidelined by the absurd displays of Donald Trump and the issue of Greenland. So only a strong intervention could bring the attention of politicians and financiers back to Ukraine, if only for a moment. Yes, Zelenskyy, lambasting Europe while treading ever so carefully with Trump, who does not want Ukraine to use Tomahawks, has behaved unfairly. But it is difficult to say he was wrong when he asked 'if Putin attacks Lithuania or Poland, who will respond?' We still believe that NATO will step in if that happens, that it will respond. But what if it doesn't?

As the fifth year of war gets under way, it is clear that Ukraine is exhausted. Russia does not want to end the war, solidarity among allies is crumbling, and Donald Trump is more sympathetic to a criminal than to the president of a country defending itself against invasion. The only possible success for Ukraine would be to end the war along the current frontline. Even if this success were short-lived, after which Russia would move westwards once again, it would give Kyiv time to catch its breath.

How can we achieve this? Are we helpless? Nothing of the sort. The European Union is opening a new chapter with India. The US raid on Venezuela is changing the structure of the oil business and may cut into Russia's profits, as might the fall of the regime in Iran.

However, this means that societies need to wake up. Nothing irritates me more than war fatigue among allies. People living in allied countries can sleep soundly in warm homes, they have electricity, gas and oil, and they do not need to install apps to warn them of impending strikes and seek the nearest shelter.

There is no going back to those memorable days in early 2022 when Europe opened its hearts and doors to refugees. There is no need because we are in a different place. What is important is that we do not get used to the war, that we do not just accept things as they are. That we do not toe the line of Russian propaganda and say 'it is not our war'.

And that we do not forget that every day at 9 a.m., across all cities and villages in Ukraine, clocks strike, marking a minute of silence in honour of the victims of the war against Russia's barbarism.

***Michał Olszewski*** is the head of foreign affairs at the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, writer and author. His publications include 'Ptaki krzyczą nieustannie', '#Upał' and 'Najlepszych butów na świecie'. He is

involved in providing material assistance to Ukraine.

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## A SAFE AND INDEPENDENT UKRAINE REQUIRES EUROPE'S CONTINUED SOLIDARITY

**The EESC has stood by Ukraine since the start of Russia's aggression, and its members did not hesitate to support Ukrainian people and refugees directly in their own countries. Marcin Nowacki, a Polish member of the EESC and president of the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN), spoke to us about the assistance provided by Polish businesses both during the early stages of war and now, during its fourth winter.**

**You represent employers at the European Economic and Social Committee. Could you tell us how Polish companies and entrepreneurs have been involved in supporting Ukraine since the outbreak of the war?**

Polish businesses have been involved in helping Ukraine since day one. This has included financial support (for the Ukrainian army and NGOs), material support (humanitarian aid convoys), infrastructure and logistical support (providing warehouses and offices) and business support (helping Ukrainians join the Polish and European markets). It's hard to list all the forms it took because everyone wanted to help and took the initiative themselves. In my case, in the first weeks of the war my involvement was focused on organisation and transportation of advanced medical products for the Ukrainian military. In a small, international team, we managed to organise the financing for the purchase of the products needed and to cover all the logistics involved in this process. I spent many weeks travelling by bus and making deliveries to the Ukrainian side.

**What kind of support has been offered to refugees from Ukraine in Poland? In recent months there has been talk of 'solidarity fatigue', and reports indicate that public support for hosting Ukrainians is not as strong as it was at the beginning of the war. In your experience, are entrepreneurs and businesses decreasing their involvement in supporting refugees from Ukraine?**

After four years of war, the intensity of support and involvement across society is certainly at a different level. During the early stages of the war, support covered almost all possible areas, from people taking families into their own homes, to financial support, to psychological and legal assistance. I remember frantic phone calls between family, friends and colleagues trying to find extra rooms or beds for refugees. It was real, spontaneous involvement by society as a whole. More recently, this type of thing is no longer what's needed. Most refugees residing in Poland have found work and that is the greatest support that Poland, and our employers, can provide. Fortunately, the Polish labour market is very dynamic and open. Refugees from Ukraine are always welcome. However, in certain sectors, where there has been a rapid change in the market over a relatively short period of time, some expressions of dissatisfaction can be heard. This is

mostly an emotional reaction, as while Poland has a very large refugee population, it is also experiencing a historically low unemployment rate. In my view, there is a place for all of us. One ongoing challenge is knowledge of the Polish language. It's important to remember that knowledge of the local language is important in Poland, in terms of both the labour market and for becoming part of society.

**What forms of assistance will be crucial in the long term, particularly when it comes to rebuilding Ukraine and strengthening its civil society? What role can employers' organisations play in this process?**

The role of civil society organisations, including business organisations, is twofold: to support Ukraine's European integration process and to work towards the long-term commitment of European countries to provide military and financial assistance for Ukraine as it defends itself. We know that as any war goes on, fatigue sets in, especially for communities that are not directly involved. Many would like the problem to just sort itself out. But it doesn't work that way and Ukraine needs Europe. Europe, in turn, needs a safe and independent Ukraine. It is therefore important to adapt to European integration and to maintain ongoing interest and sympathy for Ukraine within European societies. This takes work and effort on all our parts, including, of course, Ukrainians themselves.



## CIVIL SOCIETY FROM CANDIDATE COUNTRIES AT THE HEART OF EU ENLARGEMENT

**The European Economic and Social Committee's enlargement candidate members (ECMs) initiative, launched in 2023, is the first EU-level initiative to directly involve civil society representatives from EU candidate countries in the EU decision-making process. Four civil society representatives from Ukraine - Yulia Goncharova, Yuriy Stepanets, Kateryna Glazkova and Olesia Briazgunova - share what the ECM initiative has meant for them and how it can support Ukraine's civil society on the country's path towards EU membership.**

In September 2023 the EESC introduced an initiative to involve representatives from the civil society of EU candidate countries in the Committee's advisory work by appointing ECMs. The project brought the EESC to the forefront of the EU landscape as it became the first institution to open its doors to candidate countries, facilitating their progressive and concrete integration into the EU. Representatives from 10 candidate countries help prepare EESC opinions and participate in plenary sessions that focus on enlargement.

Between 2024 and 2025, ECMs contributed to 21 EESC opinions across key policy areas, including European defence, cohesion policy, the single market and the agri-food sector. The initiative's early success led to additional Commission funding to boost and permanently embed the project.

An evaluation report assessed the pilot phase of the ECM initiative, examining its implementation, stakeholder feedback and its political and practical impact. It highlights strong support for the initiative's continuation, clear added value for EU policymaking, and increased visibility.

Three opinions were adopted with the contribution of civil society representatives from Ukraine:

- [A predictable and common European way forward for Ukrainians in the EU](#)
- [White paper on the future of European defence](#)
- [How to ensure the social, environmental and economic sustainability of the EU agri-food sector with future enlargement](#)

We talked to four civil society representatives from Ukraine – **Yulia Gonchareva, Yuriy Stepanets, Kateryna Glazkova and Olesia Briazgunova** – about what participating in [the ECM initiative](#) has meant for them and how it can benefit Ukraine's civil society and their country's prospects of joining the EU.

### **What does the ECM initiative mean to you?**

**Ms Gonchareva, Federation of Employers of Ukraine:** The ECM initiative represents an important platform for cooperation and stronger institutions. It serves as a bridge between social partners and civil society representatives from EU candidate countries and EU Member States, fostering constructive dialogue on shared challenges and promoting EU principles, values and best practices in candidate countries.

The initiative provides a structured framework where experience, innovation and expert knowledge in the field of social dialogue can be brought together, helping identify practical solutions to issues of critical importance for all stakeholders involved.

Furthermore, the ECM initiative facilitates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of candidate countries, while overcoming stereotypes and building mutual trust. It helps identify complementary strengths and areas for greater cooperation, thereby supporting gradual alignment with EU standards and requirements and contributing to the broader EU integration process.

**Mr Stepanets, Association of Ukrainian Civic Initiatives:** For me, the ECM initiative includes two very important aspects. First, it means being heard. It gives me the opportunity to represent the voice of Ukrainian civil society organisations in discussions that directly concern the future of Ukraine. I represent regional and local NGOs that work very closely with communities. They are deeply connected to local people, but they often have little access to political decision-makers – both in Ukraine and at EU level.

For many years, local and regional organisations were almost completely excluded from important discussions about our country's present and future. The ECM initiative gives me the opportunity to speak on behalf of hundreds of Ukrainian organisations that support communities every day and help Ukraine stay strong during the war. In many areas, NGOs are the only players who can speak openly about citizens' real needs. It is therefore very important that these voices not be lost.

Second, the ECM initiative gives us the opportunity to observe and learn. We can see how EU mechanisms for dialogue and decision-making work in practice. This experience helps us prepare for the moment when Ukrainian representatives will become full members of the EESC and other European institutions.

**Ms Glazkova, Union of Ukrainian Entrepreneurs (SUP):** For the Union of Ukrainian Entrepreneurs, which represents more than 1 300 businesses from across Ukraine, participation in the EESC's ECM initiative is strategically important.

The ECM initiative is not merely a platform for dialogue. It is a structured pre-accession scheme that allows representatives of organised civil society from candidate countries to engage directly in the EU's advisory processes. Through participation in section meetings and plenary sessions, Ukrainian representatives can follow and contribute to the preparation of EESC opinions at an early stage.

For Ukrainian businesses, this means practical integration into the EU policy environment even before formal EU membership. The initiative provides exposure to legislative discussions, regulatory priorities and policy debates that shape the EU single market. It also creates a space where employers' organisations, trade unions and other organised civil society players from Ukraine can engage on an equal footing with their EU counterparts.

In this sense, the ECM initiative serves as a bridge between candidate countries and the EU institutions, strengthening institutional alignment and mutual understanding.

**Ms Briazgunova, Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU):** For me, this initiative was a great opportunity to learn how the Committee works and to better understand how trade unions can engage in this area in the future. It was a new and valuable experience that I will definitely use in my professional work. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to not only listen to debates, but also take part and represent the position of the KVPU.

**In your opinion, how can your participation in the ECM initiative benefit Ukraine's civil society and support your country's aspiration to join the EU?**

**Ms Goncharova:** Participation in the ECM initiative can benefit Ukrainian civil society in several important ways:

*It can boost institutional capacity and expertise.* Engagement with EU partners allows Ukrainian organisations to develop best practices from European employers' organisations, improve their advocacy skills and align their activities with EU standards and regulatory frameworks.

*It increases involvement in European integration processes.* Active participation helps civil society contribute to policymaking, ensure public oversight of reforms and support the effective implementation of the EU *acquis* in Ukraine.

*It expands international networks and partnerships.* The ECM initiative provides opportunities to establish strategic partnerships, joint projects and experience-sharing, thereby increasing Ukrainian organisations' capacity to operate effectively at both national and European level.

*It builds trust and alignment with EU values.* Participation demonstrates commitment to the principles of social dialogue, the rule of law, transparency and democratic governance – an important signal in the context of EU accession negotiations and Ukraine's ongoing development as a democratic and socially inclusive state.

*It involves cooperation to preserve and advance sustainable development goals in Ukraine.* Russia's war against sovereign Ukraine is undermining key and fundamental sustainable development goals necessary for

normal life. Every day, Ukrainians fight for access to heat, electricity and water. Russia's large-scale attacks are destroying companies, hospitals, schools and key infrastructure. In our view, providing European colleagues with information about these events reinforces their determination to maintain EU support for Ukraine. Only together can we defeat the aggressor!

**Mr Stepanets:** For me, the ECM initiative is a practical model that shows how structured civil society can work effectively. It is both an inspiration and an example of what kind of structures we need to build in Ukraine so that civil society can make a constructive contribution to the future of our country and to the European Union.

After seeing the benefits of structured civil society in practice, I am personally working to help develop similar structures in Ukraine. We need a platform similar to the EESC that allows open debate, structured dialogue and representation of civil society, based on clear democratic principles and participation.

This is especially important now. Since Ukraine cannot hold elections during wartime, we rely more on participatory democracy. For this to work properly and include different voices, we need strong and well-organised civil society structures. In the future, these structures should also be connected to EU processes.

Another important aspect is responsibility. I believe that Ukrainian civil society shares responsibility with the Ukrainian government in the EU accession process. We must help represent the needs of citizens, economic sectors, cultural communities and vulnerable groups. As we follow accession negotiations, we can already see that some social groups and sectors are not sufficiently included.

It is our duty to represent these voices in discussions about Ukraine's future EU membership. In the end, it will not only be the Ukrainian government that joins the European Union, it will be every Ukrainian citizen. This is why we must share responsibility for both negotiations and the integration process.

**Ms Glazkova:** Participation in the ECM initiative boosts the institutional capacity and policy competence of Ukrainian organised civil society. By engaging in EESC procedures, Ukrainian stakeholders are gaining first-hand experience in structured social dialogue, consensus-building and advisory policymaking at EU level.

For the business community, this engagement is particularly valuable. It enables early understanding of regulatory developments related to the EU single market, sustainability standards, climate policy tools such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism, industrial policy initiatives and the implementation of the Ukraine Facility. Such early exposure allows Ukrainian companies to anticipate regulatory changes, adapt proactively and align with the EU *acquis* in view of Ukraine becoming a member.

At the same time, ECM participation enhances credibility and trust. The active and constructive involvement of Ukrainian employers' organisations and other civil society players demonstrates institutional readiness and reinforces confidence in Ukraine's EU trajectory.

Importantly, the ECM framework also ensures that the voice of Ukrainian business is reflected in European discussions on reconstruction, economic resilience and future integration into EU value chains. This two-way engagement strengthens both Ukraine's reform process and the EU's understanding of Ukraine's economic realities.

**Ms Briazgunova:** In my opinion, participation in the ECM initiative is highly beneficial for civil society organisations, including the trade unions I represent. It provides a deeper understanding of the EESC's work

across its various sections.

We believe that Ukraine will become a member of the EU in the near future, which is why it is important for us to be prepared to work within the European institutions and effectively represent workers and their interests.

Due to the challenges caused by the war, it was not always easy to attend meetings in person, but I was able to participate in several online sessions. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the ECM project team for their support and assistance.

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## THE ONLY WAY TO SURVIVE IS TO SHUT DOWN YOUR IMAGINATION AND KEEP GOING

**Ukrainian journalist Olga Chaiko has been following Russia's illegal military aggression against Ukraine since day one. Four years on, she shares with us the realities of her journalistic work in Ukraine.**

**What does your everyday life in Kyiv look like in the fourth year of the war? What has changed the most in your journalistic work?**

Life in Kyiv is now an everyday quest to figure out what will disappear next: heating or cold water. We have electricity for some two to seven hours per day, mainly at night. For most people, this is the time to cook, do laundry, wash their hair, turn on heaters and charge their devices. Hot water and heating are absent in around 1000 homes in Kyiv after a series of Russian bombings that sought to destroy Ukraine's energy system.

This is why most of the articles we write these days are about the consequences of these attacks – the victims, survival strategies, cities' emergency plans and so on.

As a channel still participating in the United News marathon, we cover news from all regions of Ukraine, including the frontline, and gather donations for the army. Many of my colleagues and friends have joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, so we help them as well. We cooperate closely, as many of them now serve as press officers within brigades, helping ensure openness in the army.

**How do you imagine Ukraine's near future, given that the war has been going on for four years and still shows no sign of ending?**

This question is the hardest one. I think the only way to survive is to shut down your imagination and continue the struggle, even though the possible scenarios are not optimistic, starting with the risk of a frozen conflict that would merely delay the next stage of the war. We are likely in the middle of the fight against an insane maniac and a country with undying imperial ambitions.

**Olga Chaiko** is Ukrainian journalist on the 'Fakty' news programme at ICTV (International Commercial Television), a Ukrainian private television channel launched in 1992. ICTV is one of the television channels participating in the United News marathon, a 24/7 joint national news broadcast launched in February 2022 to provide continuous wartime news coverage following Russia's full-scale invasion.

You can read Olga Chaiko's previous article for EESC Info from July 2022 [here](#).



## SUSTAINED CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION: FROM EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO EUROPEAN COOPERATION

**Four years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, civil society activist Rena Faradzeva has been at the forefront of coordinating and developing civil society initiatives in Belgium aimed at supporting Ukrainians both in the EU and back home. For EESC Info, she lists different organisations and programmes that assist Ukrainian refugees in Belgium and strengthen cooperation between EU and Ukrainian communities. Through its partnership initiatives, the EESC has played an important supporting role in organising partnership events and study visits for Ukrainian civil society organisations and young people.**

From the very first days of the invasion, our priority was immediate action. Together with committed partners and volunteers, we mobilised all available resources and worked to build the necessary infrastructure to provide basic needs coverage for the enormous number of Ukrainians who fled to Belgium seeking temporary protection. The scale of displacement required rapid coordination, flexibility and strong cooperation between civil society actors while local governments searched for long-term solutions.

One of the key initiatives that emerged during this period was the Family Helps Family Fund (FHFF). What began as a focused support effort quickly expanded into a large and dynamic network connecting Europeans and Ukrainians. The Fund became not only a channel for humanitarian assistance but also a platform for solidarity, coordination and trust-building between communities. Its strength lies in the direct, human-centred approach: families supporting families, individuals supporting individuals.

The second major direction of my work has been the support and education of Ukrainian young people in Belgium. What initially started as assistance to help young Ukrainians integrate into Belgian society – through educational support, mentorship and community engagement – gradually evolved into a structured and ambitious initiative. This development led to the creation of BELUKRA, an exclusive joint Belgium-based non-governmental educational project for Ukrainian young people, which further strengthened cooperation between Belgian and Ukrainian stakeholders.

As a result of this process, we successfully established the European Collaborative Institute NGO. This organisation actively utilises both existing and newly available European grants and programmes to create

educational opportunities and long-term development pathways for young Ukrainians. Our goal is not only integration, but empowerment – enabling young people to become active European citizens while preserving their identity and contributing to Ukraine's future reconstruction.

The third pillar of my work has grown from accumulated experience, partnerships and cooperation with important diplomatic and civil society actors in Europe. Through this collaboration, we recognised the need for a more responsible, structured and results-oriented approach to international youth engagement. This vision led to the development of the International Youth Academy of European Diplomacy Europe NGO, which aims to prepare a new generation of young leaders equipped with knowledge of European institutions, democratic values and diplomatic processes.

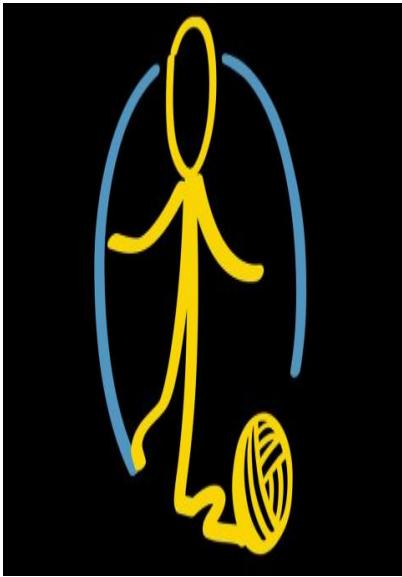
In this context, cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has been particularly important. The EESC provides an opportunity to work together at both public and institutional level, highlighting the actual and pressing challenges facing Ukraine and its society at different scales. Through its infrastructure, platforms and resources, the EESC helps ensure that these urgent issues – affecting Ukraine, its people and especially its children – become an important and visible part of European discussion. This cooperation contributes not only to raising awareness, but also to advancing concrete, solution-oriented approaches to the complex problems Ukraine is facing today.

None of these efforts would have been possible without the tireless work of the many organisations and activists of Ukrainian origin who have been helping day and night, both in Ukraine and across Europe. I would like to give particular recognition to the Ukrainian Scouts in Belgium NGO, Ukrainian Voices NGO and the Association of Ukrainian Women in Belgium NGO. Their dedication, cooperation and constant support have played a vital role in assisting displaced Ukrainians and sustaining humanitarian efforts.

Four years into the full-scale invasion, our work has evolved from emergency response to long-term structural cooperation. The challenge now is to sustain this commitment, deepen partnerships and ensure that solidarity translates into lasting impact – for Ukrainians in Belgium, for Ukraine and for Europe as a whole.

**Rena Faradzheva** is a Belgian-based NGO leader, founder, and CEO with more than 20 years of professional experience in education, social services, and international cooperation. She serves as project manager of several civil society initiatives in Belgium, focusing on access to education, human rights protection, youth engagement, and humanitarian support for vulnerable communities. Her work combines expertise in psychology, governance, cross-border project coordination, and diplomacy, with a strong commitment to social cohesion and European civic values.

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## VOLUNTEER NETWORK GUIDING UKRANIANS TO SAFETY

**International and run by volunteers, Rubikus.HelpUA has been helping to evacuate people from Ukraine's war zones to European countries since the earliest days of Russia's full-scale invasion. Older people, persons with disabilities and families with children are at the heart of its work. Each day, around 70 families ask for their help. The Rubikus team explains how this lifeline operates in practice.**

**Can you explain how the process works for a Ukrainian family seeking assistance from Rubikus.helpUA, from initial contact to reaching their final destination?**

Rubikus has supported Ukrainian families since the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion. To date, we have helped evacuate more than 60 000 people, including refugees from occupied territories.

The process consists of a few simple steps. A family fills out a short form on [our website](#) (providing basic contact details, approximate travel dates and a preferred destination country, if they have one). The request goes into our system. An operator reviews the information and checks that the necessary documents are in order. The case is then handed over to a coordinator, who takes responsibility for the journey from that point until the family reaches their final destination.

If people are leaving Ukraine for the first time since the start of the full-scale war and cannot afford travel costs, Rubikus may cover their tickets and, if needed, accommodation on the journey. We prioritise support for vulnerable groups, including families with children, older adults, people with disabilities and people with medical needs or pets.

### **How does your team support families throughout their journey, particularly vulnerable individuals?**

Twice a month, Rubikus runs a free evacuation bus from Lviv to Warsaw for vulnerable groups, including families with small children, older people and families travelling with pets. Many commercial carriers will not take people with disabilities or animals, which makes this route inaccessible to many families. Our bus delivers people directly to accommodation in Warsaw, which Rubikus covers.

In addition, we operate a 'medical' bus designed for people with severe health limitations. It has 44 regular seats and seven lay-down beds and picks up passengers in several cities across Ukraine, including Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Kyiv and Lutsk, so people with serious conditions do not need to travel to Lviv first. This service is intended for those who cannot endure long journeys on commercial transport, including adults and children with disabilities and patients in advanced stages of illness.

In February 2026, one of our medical evacuations took place during severe winter conditions and ongoing ballistic attacks on Kyiv, which made the operation particularly challenging but also critically necessary. The launch of the 'medical' bus was supported by a dedicated fundraising campaign, and we aim to run these medical evacuations monthly, as they are often a matter of survival.

## **How do volunteers - both on the ground and remotely - coordinate to ensure families are supported effectively, and what roles are critical for the success of Rubikus.helpUA?**

Each family is assigned a coordinator, who plans the evacuation route according to the family's specific needs and limitations. Many refugees are travelling abroad for the first time and may never have used long-distance transport before. Coordinators provide step-by-step guidance throughout the journey, help families navigate transfers and border crossings and offer practical and emotional support along the way.

Behind each case, a broader volunteer team supports the process. Some volunteers handle ticket purchases and transit bookings, others organise bus charters and accommodation and on-the-ground teams assist families at key points along the route - helping them board trains, find refugee centres, obtain essentials such as baby food or access urgent medical help. This coordination helps families navigate unfamiliar systems with support at all stages of the journey.

## **How do you coordinate evacuations across multiple European countries, and how does your team address issues related to local policies, paperwork or language barriers?**

Rubikus works with dedicated local experts for each country to which refugees are relocated. These experts continuously monitor changes in policies and requirements related to temporary protection and residency and advise the team on practical conditions in each destination country. This allows us to plan routes and placements that are realistic, lawful and sustainable for each family.

Our international team also maintains two public information resources: [varenik.help](#), which helps compare living conditions and support systems across different countries, and the [Rubikus.HelpUA Wiki page](#), which provides structured, country-specific guidance for refugees and those supporting them.

## **Looking ahead, what are Rubikus.helpUA's plans for the future development of the project?**

We aim to continue responding to the refugee situation as effectively as possible, within the limits of our resources, which come entirely from private donations. Our focus remains evacuating people from the most difficult and dangerous regions of Ukraine, including occupied territories, to countries where they can access safety and long-term support.

We plan to keep operating our evacuation buses on a regular basis, expand our network of partner organisations and continue to raise awareness about the ongoing challenges faced by Ukrainian families.

*[Rubikus.HelpUA](#) is a non-profit volunteer project that helps people in Ukraine (including those in Russian-occupied territories) to evacuate to safety in European countries. It started operating in February 2022, immediately after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and has since helped evacuate over 60 000 people.*

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## THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S WAR: THE REALITY OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED UKRAINIANS

**Russia's relentless attacks on Ukraine's energy system have pushed millions into darkness, but for people with disabilities the impact is even more devastating. Power outages strip away autonomy, medical support and hope, leaving many isolated and vulnerable. Civil society organisations are working tirelessly to ease this suffering. Lars Bosselmann, Executive Director of the European Blind Union, shares how his organisation is supporting blind and partially sighted Ukrainians.**

**By Lars Bosselmann**

Four years of humanitarian tragedy. Four years in which Ukrainians have been living with daily hardship. The start of the Russian invasion in February 2022 has shaken Ukraine at the political, economic and social level. Although we usually speak about the impact of conflicts in people's lives in broad terms, we should always remind ourselves about how the reality of communities at risk of social exclusion – such as persons with disabilities – are affected by the devastation caused by war.

Since the start of the conflict, the European Blind Union (EBU) has been closely monitoring the situation of blind and partially sighted Ukrainians, and has organised support thanks to our generous members.

Recently, we had the chance to talk to Larysa Baida, from the [National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine](#) (NAPD), in the latest episode of our podcast, EBU in Action (available on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Podbean](#) and [Spotify](#)). Her testimony revealed a terrifying scenario where people are losing their lives and homes, and where schools, medical facilities and other essential structures are being destroyed.

Power outages continue to occur, resulting in the collapse of the energy system. All this is happening during a period when temperatures in some regions can reach as low as -25°C, making this one of the harshest winters in recent years.

This terrible context doesn't only affect infrastructure. The crisis is also about constant violations of fundamental rights by Russia: many people with disabilities are losing their autonomy and independence due to power outages, as they rely on electricity to use assistive devices. Additionally, being unable to use home-based medical equipment and the lack of personalised rehabilitation services increase the risk of medical complications, as well as feelings of loneliness and despair.

Despite all these challenges, civil society organisations are doing their best to meet the needs of blind and partially sighted people. In addition, EBU has also committed to continuing its financial support to help visually impaired Ukrainians. Through funds donated to NAPD, our colleagues have been able to support a shelter in Dnipro (including repairs to its water supply) and purchase medical equipment for the Okhmatdyt Hospital in Kyiv (a healthcare facility where NAPD provides training to doctors and medical staff), among others.

Thanks to our collaboration with NAPD, we have also been able to distribute financial aid among the different regional branches of the [Ukrainian Association of the Blind](#), EBU's Ukrainian member. In parallel, our network of national associations has also contributed to humanitarian assistance in several areas, such as helping blind and partially sighted Ukrainian refugees integrate into their host countries.

As you read these lines, NAPD continues its close cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities, UN agencies and other disability-related stakeholders to support our communities in Ukraine. In an international context marked by political turmoil, we must not forget the desperate struggles of those who are living through war. Our most precious wish is for this war to come to an end and lead us to a new peaceful era where rebuilding can take place.

*Lars Bosselmann is the Executive Director of the European Blind Union (EBU).*

If you wish to make a donation to help people with disabilities in Ukraine, you can find the necessary financial information on the NAPD's [webpage](#).



## EUROPE AND THE SDGs: BUILDING BRIDGES WITH THE GLOBAL MAJORITY

The SDGs are not being achieved – neither in Europe nor globally. This is not because the goals and targets set in 2015 were poorly designed or impossible to reach, but largely due to failures in global and national governance systems.

The Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists – which tracks humanity's proximity to self-annihilation through nuclear war, climate change, biological events, and disruptive technologies – was updated in January 2026 to 85 seconds before midnight, the closest point since its creation after World War II. The inability to prevent, manage, and resolve geopolitical crises in a timely and effective manner remains a major obstacle to advancing the long-term sustainable development agenda agreed upon a decade ago.

In Europe, the latest edition of the [Europe Sustainable Development Report \(ESDR\)](#), prepared in collaboration with the EESC and released on 26 February 2026, shows that SDG progress has stalled. Many environmental and social indicators are stagnating or even moving in the wrong direction. Finland tops this year's SDG Index for Europe, followed by Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and Norway. Yet none of these countries are on track to meet all the goals and all face significant challenges in environmental areas, particularly regarding international spillovers, and in implementing the SDGs' 'Leave No One Behind' principle. Some socio-economic indicators, such as material deprivation, have worsened. Trust in government remains low in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom and is generally below pre-2022 levels.

At the EU level, attention to the SDGs has decreased. The European Commission's Work Programmes for 2025 and 2026 no longer explicitly reference the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda. Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the Commission's narrative has shifted toward strategic autonomy, simplification, defence, and competitiveness. It is increasingly unclear whether the European Green Deal, adopted in 2019 as Europe's growth strategy and long-term commitment to climate neutrality, still serves as a coherent guiding framework.

Meanwhile, most UN member states remain committed to sustainable development and the Paris Agreement. Of the 193 UN member states, 190 have submitted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). The majority supported the June 2025 Seville Commitment on financing for sustainable development. Globally, cities and regions are also accelerating action through Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

What is often called the 'Global South' is, demographically and politically, the 'Global Majority', the majority of the world's population and countries that continue to support the SDGs. The United States stands out as a notable exception. It has not submitted a national sustainable development plan, has openly opposed the SDGs at the federal level, withdrew from the Seville negotiations in 2025, and exited 66 UN organizations in January 2026. Although the US wields major global influence, it represents less than 5% of the world's population.

As Europe reassesses its alliances in a more multipolar world, the SDGs offer a common language that supports Europe's strategic interests at home and abroad. For example, reducing dependence on fossil fuels by investing in renewable and clean energy strengthens European autonomy and security.

Since 2019, SDSN and its partners have been advancing the concept of SDG/Green Deal Diplomacy as a framework for strengthening strategic partnerships with Africa, China, India, Latin America, Eurasia, and other regions. Europe holds significant advantages, including a large single market, a well-educated population, and substantial savings. These could be mobilised to scale up investments in digital and green technologies—provided Europe can overcome persistent fragmentation in its capital markets.

To reinforce its global role, the EU must articulate a clear, coherent voice and translate it into consistent international action. This requires demonstrating unwavering support for UN-based multilateralism, including the systematic condemnation of violations of international law covering all wars of choice and all covert or overt regime-change operations prohibited under the UN Charter. Article 2(4) clearly states that the use of force or threat of force against the territorial integrity of a state is illegal.

In a fragmented multilateral landscape, the SDGs provide a pathway for Europe and other medium-sized economies seeking balanced development, global cooperation, and a rules-based international trading system. Europe could reaffirm its commitment through a joint declaration by the Council, Parliament, and Commission similar to the early years of SDG implementation. The EU could also commit to presenting a second Union-wide Voluntary Review by July 2027, ahead of the September 2027 SDG Summit. This review could address the challenges highlighted in the seventh ESDR, including international spillovers, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic convergence, while outlining a clear vision and concrete proposals for an ambitious post-2030 sustainable development framework.

As the world's largest network of scientists and researchers dedicated to the SDGs, the SDSN stands ready to support European leadership in advancing sustainable development domestically and internationally by 2030 and beyond.

Dr Guillaume Lafourture

Vice President and Head of the Paris Office, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)

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## SERVICE, FRATERNITY, SUPPORT – THE PSGA’s SCOUTING SOLIDARITY WITH UKRAINE



**The Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (PSGA) was awarded the 2022 Civil Society Prize. This article illustrates the ongoing support the PSGA provides to the people of Ukraine.**

### **Service from the very beginning**

Four years on from the start of Russia’s illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, solidarity is no longer a sudden call to action, but a long-term commitment. For the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association, helping the people of Ukraine has been a natural part of service from the very beginning, rooted in the idea of fraternity, responsibility and community action.

The PSGA is the largest youth organisation in Poland, with over 115 000 members, and has been educating young people through action, adventure and service for over 100 years. In the face of a humanitarian crisis, this mission has gained particular significance. Scouts and guides have worked at the border, organised support hubs in train stations, coordinated humanitarian aid transport and managed temporary accommodation. Today, as hundreds of thousands of refugees – including children and young people – are living in Polish communities, scouting activities have moved from intervention to long-term integration and educational work.

### **Support programmes and cooperation with WAGGGS**

Cooperation with the international scouting movement, in particular with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), has played a key role in these efforts. Thanks to the resources provided by WAGGGS, two editions of the ‘Teams for Ukraine’ programme have been carried out, awarding dozens of mini-grants to local scouting and guiding communities. These grants made it possible to purchase equipment, help Ukrainian children attend camps, carry out educational and integration projects and work towards building peace and intercultural skills.

The current follow-up to this is the ‘Helping Ukraine with WAGGGS’ campaign, in which WAGGGS has provided the PSGA with EUR 11 300 to support refugees living in local communities. This new action focuses on more personalised help: the scouting community determines the specific needs of children and families and then plans actions that will actually improve their circumstances, from buying appliances and furniture to psychological support and language classes. Units can apply for grants of up to PLN 4000, which enables them to carry out projects tailored to the local context.

## Local initiatives: solidarity in practice

‘Think global, act local’ – this slogan has guided scouting from the beginning. Hundreds of local initiatives have been set up across Poland, often created from the grassroots by scouting teams and volunteers. In Olsztyn, scouts bought a projector for the ‘Two Wings UA’ Foundation, which supports refugees through language courses and activities for children. In Nowy Sącz, a five-person family of scouts from Ukraine received support. The boys could take part in camps thanks to the purchased equipment and one of them received a bike which made it easier for him to attend daily sports training.

As part of the ‘What a ride’ project, volunteers repaired used bicycles and gave them to refugees, along with helmets and reflective items, which gave them much more mobility and safety. In Krakow, volunteers renovated the terrace at the Spilno Hub support centre, creating a space for educational, integration and therapeutic activities. Other projects focused on empowering young people – financial support for driving lessons or boating licenses and purchase of educational equipment such as laptops that opened doors for further education and work.

There was also no shortage of actions aimed at whole families and people in particularly difficult situations. Scouts and guides supported families with children with disabilities by funding rehabilitation, public transport and winter clothing. Psychological support projects, carried out in cooperation with specialists, included play therapy for children affected by war trauma and consultations for carers. Joint educational trips and cultural initiatives helped refugees stay connected to their heritage and build new relationships in their host communities.

A particular example of integration is the establishment of the 33d Konstancin Scouting Team ‘Borysfen’, led by instructors from Ukraine. It has become a space for development and education for young Ukrainians and at the same time a bridge between the Polish and Ukrainian scouting movements.

## Why solidarity still matters

Continuing to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine is as important today as it was in the days immediately following the outbreak of the war. Although four years have passed since the start of the Russian invasion, it continues to deeply affect the lives of millions of people, both those who have stayed in Ukraine and those who have sought refuge in other countries. Solidarity is not just a one-off gesture, but a long-term process of supporting, accompanying and building a community based on empathy, responsibility and respect for the dignity of every person.

By supporting the people of Ukraine, we show that values such as freedom, human rights and democracy are not empty slogans, but the foundation of the European community. Continued solidarity helps refugees rebuild their sense of security, facilitates integration and gives hope and real tools to live independently, while also strengthening civil society across Europe. It is also an expression of opposition to violence and injustice and a commitment to stand with those who need it most.

Information about ongoing activities, support opportunities and educational materials is continuously published on the website [zhp.pl/zhp-dla-ukrainy](http://zhp.pl/zhp-dla-ukrainy). The website is the PSGA’s main information platform for news on support projects, reports from ongoing initiatives, materials for volunteers and people and institutions wanting to engage with Ukrainians.

*Chair, Małgorzata Godyń*

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