



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL



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Dear readers,

The outbreak of another war in the Middle East, in what was already a very unnerving year in geopolitics, is deeply concerning. The impact of this ongoing conflict will be strongly felt in the EU, and increasingly so if it drags on. Let's please not forget the ordinary citizens whose lives are being upended. Homes destroyed, forced to flee, living in constant fear.

It's absolutely unacceptable that civilians and children are being killed, especially in such numbers. We call for the full respect of international law. Civilian infrastructure, including schools and sites of energy production, must not be targets.

I vehemently repeat my call for a ceasefire, for talks and an end to this war. I share my solidarity with the people of Iran in their struggle for democracy. I reiterate that dialogue and civil society participation are essential for a positive outcome for the region.

Events in the Middle East were very much on our minds during Civil Society Week, 2-5 March. This was the third edition of our annual flagship event and the biggest and best yet. With civil society representatives from across Europe, we examined and debated topics including the European Citizens' Initiative, the European Democracy Shield, the importance of media and digital resilience for democracies, as well as tackling inequality and housing. We created a living forum – a powerful demonstration of collaboration, commitment and shared responsibility. I look forward to debating the outcomes at this week's plenary.

A key highlight was the participation of the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath, who fittingly described the EESC as the 'watchdog of our democracy', and the announcement

that the Committee would be hosting the annual summit of the Civil Society Platform in addition to joining its Steering Group. Europe's successful democratic future depends on this work.

Civil Society Week ended with an event to mark International Women's Day, *Making the Invisible Visible*, which focused on the hidden work that sustains our society. It's vital we keep drawing attention to this absence of respect and dignity afforded to women, whose work is taken for granted or ignored.

Women are also undervalued economically. This was a message I shared recently with President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, who invited me to exchange views in advance of the informal leaders' retreat on competitiveness. I stressed to him that greater gender equality would make a direct positive contribution to European competitiveness, job creation and growth.

In this context, the adoption of the new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 by the European Commission, as I noted in my recent [statement](#), is a timely and very welcome step forward.

This week, I am especially looking forward to our annual youth event *Your Europe, Your Say!* on 19-20 March, and hearing from young people from across the EU on their thoughts and ideas for the future of Europe. The EESC has led the way when it comes to involving and including young people in EU policy and decision making, and it's encouraging to see EU institutions keep the momentum going in this space. This includes the Commission's recent Intergenerational Fairness Strategy, which I have [welcomed](#).

In the coming months, I'm looking forward to visiting Moldova to meet political leadership and civil society there to learn how we can best support them on their European integration path. I'm also preparing for a visit to New York and Washington D.C. to meet high-level leaders from the United Nations and the World Bank. In this increasingly turbulent and transactional world, the EU must keep flying the flag for the rules-based order, cooperation, and a strong and active civil society. These are a necessity for a more equal, sustainable and peaceful world.

Séamus Boland

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

DIARY DATES

19-20 March 2026

[Your Europe, Your Say! 2026](#)

8 April 2026

[Macroeconomic implications of the conflict in Iran](#)

11 June 2026

[Conference on delivering intergenerational solidarity](#)

17-18 June 2026

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Social media may have democratised political engagement, but it has also weaponised misogyny. Women entering public life face online attacks that differ sharply from those directed at men, targeting their appearance, private lives and family roles rather than their ideas. Such abuse undermines women's very presence in politics and discourages many from entering or staying in public life, writes our surprise guest **Barbara Helfferich**, political scientist, gender equality expert and co-founder of a Brussels-based feminist think tank.



WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THE NEW FRONTLINE OF ONLINE HATE

By Barbara Helfferich

Online harassment increasingly determines who participates in public life. Ensuring women can engage safely in democratic debate is not merely a question of equality – it is fundamental to democratic resilience.

A few weeks into her campaign for local office, a young European candidate posted a video outlining her priorities: better childcare, safer public transportation and support for local businesses. Within hours, the comments section was filled with insults about her appearance and questions about whether women should be in politics at all. The attacks quickly turned into threats. Not one comment addressed her policies.

This scenario has become alarmingly common. Across Europe, women entering the public arena – as candidates, journalists, activists, or officials – face online attacks that differ markedly in both tone and intensity from criticism directed at men. While social media has democratised political engagement, it has also weaponised misogyny, enabling coordinated harassment campaigns that specifically target women in public life.

The impact extends well beyond individual harm. With women already underrepresented in European political decision-making, prospective candidates witnessing such hostility often decide that the personal costs outweigh the benefits. Research confirms that digital harassment acts as a structural barrier, systematically discouraging women from entering or staying in politics.

Election campaigns particularly expose this dynamic. Attacks on women candidates routinely bypass policy discussions to focus on appearance, private lives, or family roles – reinforcing outdated stereotypes that frame politics as inherently male territory. The goal extends beyond political opposition: it seeks to delegitimize women’s very presence in public life.

Social media’s algorithmic design worsens the problem. Content that provokes outrage spreads faster and wider, giving abusive messages more visibility and normalising hostility toward women in politics. This creates a vicious cycle where harassment becomes not only common but also socially accepted.

For democratic societies, this represents a fundamental threat. When half the population faces disproportionate risks for participating in public debate, democratic representation suffers. Combating online violence against women thus becomes essential to protecting democracy itself.

The European Economic and Social Committee occupies a unique position to address this challenge. As the bridge between citizens and EU decision-makers, bringing together employers, workers and civil society organisations, the Committee can help ensure that digital governance, media regulation and gender equality are treated as interconnected elements of Europe’s democratic infrastructure.

Concrete solutions are emerging. Europe must strengthen platform accountability and ensure regulatory frameworks explicitly address gender-based online violence. Political parties and institutions need to provide comprehensive support for women candidates – including digital security training and rapid-response mechanisms for coordinated attacks. Media organisations and public institutions must actively highlight women’s leadership and policy contributions, shifting focus from personal attacks to substantive debate.

Europe has made significant progress in gender equality, but political representation is still uneven. Ensuring women can participate in public discourse without facing systematic intimidation goes beyond fairness – it is vital for creating resilient, inclusive democracies that accurately reflect all citizens.

The choice is clear: either we accept online harassment as the price of women’s political participation, or we recognise it as an attack on democracy itself and act accordingly.

Barbara Helfferich is a political scientist and gender equality expert focusing on democratic participation, inclusive governance and combating anti-gender movements across Europe. As co-founder and vice president of [Gender Five Plus](#), a feminist think tank based in Brussels, she works to promote gender equality in European policymaking. In 2024, she received the International European Leadership Award for her work in advancing women’s rights and democratic values.



TO THE POINT

EU Strategic Foresight is a policy tool used by the European Commission to think ahead about major global economic, technological, social, environmental and geopolitical changes and help shape policies for the future. **Philip von Brockdorff**, rapporteur of the EESC opinion on the [Strategic Foresight Report 2025](#), explains what Europe needs to consider

to stay prepared in today's turbulent geopolitical and economic context.



EU STRATEGIC FORESIGHT NEEDS A BROADER SCOPE

By Philip von Brockdorff

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the *2025 Strategic Foresight Report: Resilience 2.0*, but we believe that future foresight reports would be more relevant if they also addressed external radical disruptions, the EU's innovation gaps, internal institutional challenges and the costs of delaying EU enlargement.

The EESC is uniquely positioned to detect weak signals and underlying trends in strategic foresight. Through a permanent and structured mechanism, the EESC could contribute to the Commission's strategic foresight cycle at all stages, rather than only at the end. To strengthen the strategic foresight process, the EESC also advocates the systematic use of multiple, divergent scenarios to stress-test existing or proposed strategies.

Strategic foresight should primarily support sustainable and inclusive well-being as part of the European social model, with a focus on the European Pillar of Social Rights and intergenerational fairness. At the same time, it should take into account the current fragmentation of European capital markets, which severely constrains the efficient flow of capital to firms of all sizes, limiting innovation for SMEs and microenterprises. The EESC considers the completion of the Savings and Investments Union to be a central pillar of the EU's resilience strategy, and this should feature prominently in the process. Equally, greater recognition of the role of entrepreneurship, SMEs and microenterprises is essential.

Future strategic foresight reports should also examine whether certain regulatory approaches unintentionally undermine the competitiveness of European companies and innovators compared with third-country operators, or whether they incentivise the relocation of innovation outside Europe. In this context, we must explicitly acknowledge that the EU is falling behind global competitors in certain areas of technological innovation, with all the consequences this entails. Similarly, we need to adequately address the risks for the EU if it fails to develop and scale these technologies.

A more thorough reflection on labour migration driven by demographic change would also be relevant, particularly in light of the projected decline in the EU's working-age population by 2040.

With regard to environmental considerations, the EESC calls for strategic foresight to integrate a specific analysis of the triple planetary crisis into the report, by developing dedicated chapters on climate, biodiversity and pollution, across short-, medium- and long-term scenarios.

Finally, the EU could benefit from a joint foresight exercise aimed at developing strategic visions for future reports that are embraced by all EU institutions. Such an approach would help align strategic priorities and commit EU institutions to a shared long-term vision, rather than allowing parallel or competing strategic narratives to emerge.

THE PUBLIC SQUARE



HALVING THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES DEPENDENT ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE BY 2035 - WISFUL THINKING OR ACHIEVABLE GOAL?

Our new column, The Public Square, gives the floor to voices from across public life – civil society, journalists, NGOs, and institutions – to share the causes they champion and the issues they believe deserve attention. Our first guest is UNHCR Representative to the EU Jean-Nicolas Beuze, writing about his recent mission to Mauritania, which hosts tens of thousands of Malian refugees and is investing in their self-reliance and dignity alongside local communities. For European policymakers, this shows that such investments are not charity but one of the most effective ways to reduce long-term humanitarian costs and reduce the pressures that push people to move on.

By Jean-Nicolas Beuze, UNHCR Representative to the EU

The new UN High Commissioner for Refugees Barham Salih recently set an ambitious objective: a 50% reduction in the number of refugees living in protracted displacement and dependent on humanitarian assistance by 2035.

After 30 years in the field, my recent mission to Mauritania reminded me that this goal is not wishful thinking. It is a necessity.

In the Hodh Chargui region in eastern Mauritania, at Mbera refugee camp and in surrounding host communities, tens of thousands of Malian refugees live alongside Mauritanian families in an area already facing drought, economic hardship and limited infrastructure. If this population formed a single city, it would be among the largest in the country. Yet this is a remote rural region with scarce public resources, where every additional pressure is felt acutely.

And still, Mauritania has chosen to keep its doors open and to work with us on solutions that restore the dignity of both refugees and local communities by enabling them to become self-reliant. At a time of sharp reductions in humanitarian and development aid from Western donors, this is not only the right path – it is the only viable one.

What struck me most was the commitment of the authorities, both national and local. Ultimately, they are the ones who can deliver lasting solutions. Our discussions focused on practical steps: registering refugees quickly so their children can attend school, ensuring access to social protection systems, and allowing qualified refugees to work – including in public hospitals or schools.

Mauritania is not a wealthy country, and it operates in a fragile regional environment. Stepping back would be politically and financially easier. Maintaining a functioning asylum system and integration services requires real political courage. Mauritanian leaders and communities deserve continued international support.

Equally striking were my conversations with Malian refugees and Mauritanian residents. In the vibrant markets of the region, I heard the same message repeatedly: people do not want to depend on aid. They want the opportunity to work, support their families and contribute economically and socially.

This is where partnership becomes critical.

Despite the challenges, the Mbera region is full of opportunity. Underground water is easily accessible – which is why we are installing solar-powered boreholes. Livestock and agricultural potential are significant – which is why we support value-chain businesses that benefit both refugees and host communities.

Encouragingly, some European companies are ready to invest in these efforts. The European Commission's Global Gateway initiative is designed precisely to support such partnerships.

Together, we can turn displacement from a permanent humanitarian burden into an opportunity for economic inclusion and local development. Not because we feel sorry for refugees or impoverished communities, but because this is a model that works for everyone.

For European policymakers, the implication is clear: investing in refugee self-reliance in host countries is not charity – it is one of the most effective ways to reduce long-term humanitarian costs, strengthen fragile regions and address the drivers of onward displacement and insecurity.

If we scale such approaches, the High Commissioner's objective will not remain an aspiration. It will become proof that, with the right partnerships and political will, refugees can move from dependency to autonomy – and contribute to the societies that host them.

Jean-Nicolas Beuze is the UNHCR country representative to the EU, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal, having previously served as country representative in Iraq, Yemen and Canada. He has over 27 years of experience working for the UN in the field and at the headquarters in the areas of human rights, peacekeeping and child protection.

EESC NEWS



CIVIL SOCIETY WEEK 2026 SETS THE STAGE FOR THE EESC TO JOIN THE EU CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM

The 2026 Civil Society Week under the theme ‘People, Democracy, Resilience - Our Future’ was organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) from 2-5 March. Together with the European Citizens' Initiative, the event fostered citizen participation, underscoring its significance in safeguarding European democracy and civil society. The week concluded with the achievement of an important milestone. The stage is now set for the EESC to take part in the Commission's Civil Society Platform and host its annual summit.

The third edition of the [Civil Society Week](#) brought together more than 1 400 participants, including youth organisations, activists, organised civil society representatives from across Europe, journalists and EU policymakers. During Civil Society Week, 36 civil society organisations and more than 90 speakers were present, turning the event into a dynamic forum where participants met to network, reflect and exchange ideas on issues that directly affect people’s everyday lives.

The event was launched on Monday, 2 March with an opening session featuring **Séamus Boland**, EESC President, and **Dr Katherine Zappone**, former Irish Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Mr Boland highlighted the importance of the event as a practical demonstration of why EU institutions, social partners and civil society organisations must work together.

Throughout the week, dynamic sessions, packed discussions and strong audience engagement illustrated the growing momentum of organised civil society in Europe. More than a conference, Civil Society Week once again proved to be a living laboratory of democratic participation — a space where cooperation, shared responsibility and collective commitment to Europe’s future were not just discussed but put into practice.

The European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, **Michael McGrath**, commended the EESC on its work as a vital link between EU institutions and civil society, describing civil society organisations as 'the watchdog of our democracy'. He noted that the EESC is already participating in the Civil Society Platform's Steering Group, with the first workshop already having taken place.

He also reiterated the European Commission’s commitment to deepening cooperation with civil society organisations and the EESC by actively involving them in the development of the Civil Society Platform.

The [European Citizens' Initiative](#) (ECI) took centre stage on the second day of the Civil Society Week on 3 March. After 14 successful years, the ECI has proven that it is no longer an experiment. With four initiatives surpassing the one-million-signature threshold in 2025, the ECI carries institutional responsibility.

‘What was once an ambitious and novel idea has since evolved into a unique cross-border tool for participatory democracy’, said EESC member Maria del Carmen Barrera Chamorro, Chair of the EESC’s Group on the European Citizens’ Initiative.

Ten ECI initiatives were presented on ECI Day, including 'Ban on conversion practices in the EU', 'Stop Destroying Videogames', 'Ethics, transparency and integrity for European political parties', and 'My Voice My Choice'.

Maroš Šefčovič, Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations and Transparency, underlined the dynamics of the ECI and its momentum. 'The European Citizens' Initiative allows people across our Member States to remain actively engaged with EU policies – and its numbers underline the popularity of this agenda-setting tool', he said

Concluding the Civil Society Week, EESC President, said: 'I am immensely proud of what we have achieved together. We created a living forum – a powerful demonstration of collaboration, commitment and shared responsibility. Europe's successful democratic future depends on this work, and I look forward to building on these efforts this year, in particular as we join the Civil Society Platform and its Steering Group and host the annual summit.'

The insights and recommendations gathered during the Civil Society Week contributed to the conclusions: [*Next steps for a democratic and resilient future – delivering together a Union of opportunities, security and resilience*](#), presented at the EESC March plenary session.

The key messages emerging from four days of exchanges centred on the following European Commission's key priorities:

- Supporting people and strengthening our societies.
- Protecting our democracy and upholding our values;
- Delivering together and preparing our Union for the future.

Those are to be achieved through citizenship education, strengthening social cohesion and affordable housing; building an enabling environment for civil society and democratic resilience, civic engagement through ECIs, completing the European Democracy Shield, building a functioning Civil Society Platform as a key element of the implementation of the 'EU Strategy for Civil Society' and media and digital resilience for safeguarding democracy. Preparing the EU for the future should include allocation of sufficient funds for civic space, supporting volunteering and investing in social spending and promoting social economy.

The conclusions will feed EESC's debates and opinions and will be presented to EU institutions. (at)



EESC CONTINUES TO PUSH FOR A SOLUTION TO EUROPE'S HOUSING CRISIS

The EESC continues to shine a spotlight on the housing crisis and is ready to offer fresh recommendations on what can now be defined as a genuine emergency specifically impacting young people and the most vulnerable in our societies.

'Housing is first and foremost a social issue,' said EESC President **Séamus Boland**, speaking at the EESC's February plenary session, 'but it is no longer only that. It is an economic issue. A demographic issue. A competitiveness issue. This is why tackling the housing crisis is one of the key priorities of my term of office.' Mr Boland also pointed out that in some Member States house prices and rents had gone up by more than 100% and that young Europeans were having to postpone becoming independent.

In his view, 'the reality is unfortunately harsh: Europe is facing a housing emergency. An estimated 1.28 million people in Europe live on the street, in shelters or in temporary accommodation. In Brussels alone - the capital that should embody our collective European project - nearly 10 000 people are experiencing homelessness'.

During the plenary debate, **Dan Jørgensen**, European Commissioner for Energy and Housing, thanked the EESC for its work and for adopting the opinion entitled [For a European Affordable Housing Plan - the contribution of civil society](#) in September 2025, 'which was instrumental in helping us to shape our final plan'. He added: 'Now that we have our final plan, we must put it into action. We must harness all of the political tools and proposals so that we can support Member States, regions and local authorities to deliver more affordable, sustainable and quality housing'.

Mr Jørgensen listed the Commission's next steps:

- delivering the Affordable Housing Act as soon as possible;
- continuing to work on a housing simplification package;
- focusing on financing – another cornerstone of the plan – and launching the pan-European Investment Platform later this year;
- stepping up work with Member States to assist young people and students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds; and
- providing an extra political push and enabling closer high-level cooperation by launching a housing alliance and organising a housing summit this year.

The EESC will put forward specific recommendations at its March plenary session when it adopts the opinion entitled [Tackling housing scarcity through affordable, sustainable and family-oriented housing policies](#), which is currently being drafted by rapporteur **Thomas Kattnig**. (mp)



FOUR YEARS ON: ENSURING RECOVERY AND HOPE FOR UKRAINE'S YOUNGER GENERATION

To mark the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) placed a strong focus on the war's lasting and complex impact on children and young people. The EESC calls for coordinated European action, with strong involvement from civil society and international partners, to help young Ukrainians recover and look to the future with hope.

The debate on *The lasting scars of Russia's war against Ukraine - its devastating toll on children and youth* aimed to raise awareness of the impact of the prolonged war on children and young people, and to trigger civil dialogue and actionable responses.

Reaffirming the Committee's unwavering support for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, **Séamus Boland**, EESC President, urged all players to work together to ensure that this generation can heal, rebuild and look towards a secure and hopeful future.

Figures speak louder than words. As the **First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska** (speaking remotely) underlined, 684 children have been killed and more than 2 000 wounded over the last four years. According to UNICEF, 73% of children feel unsafe, and 54% report feelings of sadness. Around 43% of children experience severe psychological distress, including anxiety, fear and difficulties with concentration.

The Olena Zelenska Foundation puts children and young people at the heart of its work. The Foundation, in collaboration with UNICEF and other organisations, is developing a system for psychological support and rehabilitation. 'Ukraine is now a hub of innovative social and humanitarian projects and ideas. And every initiative can and should be supported' said **Ms Zelenska**.

During the debate, the participants heard the testimony of **Yaryna Bohun**, a Ukrainian student and of **Olha Fozekosh**, a Ukrainian teacher in Belgium, who shared the impact of the war on children who fled Ukraine: 'Although these children may appear calm, the scars are evident. Every day I witness what war does to their hearts', said Ms Fozekosh.

The situation is even more severe for the almost 20 000 children who have been abducted by Russia. On this subject, **Baiba Tavaresa**, Head of the European External Action Service's Ukraine Division, underscored that the return of Ukrainian children remained a top priority for the EU. Ms Tavaresa announced that the EU, together with Ukraine and Canada, is to host an International Summit on *the Return of Ukrainian Children* in the spring.

The speakers from International and Ukrainian organisations stressed during the plenary debate that raising awareness would not be enough. They drew attention to the fate of 1.6 million Ukrainian children living in territories occupied by Russia, who have been subjected to forced 'Russification' indoctrination and militarisation.

The debate concluded with a strong call for European civil society organisations to contribute funding and initiatives to help Ukrainian civil society in its effort to support its children and young people. (at)



EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE CHAMPIONS SODIUM BATTERIES FOR EUROPE'S INDUSTRIAL AND ENERGY FUTURE

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) deems sodium batteries a strategically important technology for Europe at its plenary debate on the potential of these batteries and in its latest [opinion](#).

EESC President **Séamus Boland** announced that the Committee was placing sodium batteries firmly at the centre of its work on the EU industrial and energy agenda. 'Sodium batteries, and batteries more broadly, are key for the EU's competitive edge, and it is urgent that the next Multiannual Financial Framework recognises this by providing the necessary funds for the sector,' he said.

The EU has already launched large-scale gigafactory projects to produce batteries at high volumes in order to reindustrialise Europe and strengthen its strategic autonomy. However, these projects focus mainly on lithium batteries and largely neglect the emerging technology of their sodium equivalents.

Unlike lithium, sodium does not expose the EU to the same geopolitical dependencies or supply chain vulnerabilities. Produced from abundant and widely available raw materials in Europe, sodium batteries can reduce dependence on critical imports, support EU climate and industrial objectives and create jobs through the development of gigafactories across the value chain.

The debate also highlighted the strong links between sodium batteries and both the EU's Green Deal and the EESC's [EU Blue Deal](#) initiative. 'The EESC put water on the agenda because, in emergency preparedness, water, energy and food are the real raw material emergencies. The vast majority of the Earth's water is salt water. By using the sodium from desalination processes, we can turn a largely untapped resource into a sustainable, circular industrial solution,' said **Paul Rübiger**, EESC rapporteur for the opinion on [Enhancing EU strategic autonomy and developing a greener and bluer economy: the potential of the sodium battery manufacturing sector](#).

Europe must act quickly to avoid falling behind its global competitors, which are already advancing on sodium battery technology. 'Either we remain mere consumers, or we propose an ambitious plan for the next ten years and become one of the largest suppliers of sodium-based batteries. All European countries can participate in the construction process and benefit from a technology that promotes our independence while creating jobs in all regions,' said **Hervé Jeannin**, co-rapporteur for the opinion.

The EESC opinion on sodium batteries presents an overview of the current situation and the development potential of this emerging industry, it showcases the potential applications of such batteries in different sectors (e.g. by industry, local and regional authorities and private households) and sets out the way forward for the industry. (gb)



THE EESC SUPPORTS THE REVISION OF THE TOBACCO TAXATION DIRECTIVE

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) recognises the need to adapt the excise duty framework for tobacco products in line with market developments. However, it urges caution regarding excessive increases in excise duties, as these could lead to an increase in illicit trade.

Any increase in tobacco excise duties must be proportionate, economically viable and beneficial to businesses, workers and society as a whole, said EESC member **Mariya Mincheva**, standing in for **Matteo Carlo Borsani**, rapporteur for the EESC [opinion](#) on the revision of the

Tobacco Taxation Directive. Speaking at the EESC plenary session in February, Ms Mincheva warned against sharp increases in excise duties, which could have adverse effects, such as fuelling illicit trade, undermining tax revenues and weakening public health outcomes.

For this reason, the EESC recommended gradual adjustments to excise duties, accompanied by strengthened enforcement, customs cooperation and cross-border anti-smuggling measures. Policy-makers should involve the social partners, through sharing of clear and transparent information on any policy measures and draft legislation and consultation before proposing any future policies or legislation.

The EESC called for sufficient flexibility for the Member States in their excise structures, including the option to apply unit-based or weight-based taxation for heated tobacco products. This would allow national market conditions to be taken into account while respecting EU minimum rates. In line with subsidiarity and the Member States' fiscal sovereignty, the Commission's use of delegated acts should be limited to technical adjustments linked to inflation.

While supporting efforts to reduce tobacco consumption, the EESC noted that taxation alone cannot achieve this objective. It called for risk-proportionate taxation so that non-combustible and reduced-risk products are not taxed at the same rate as combustible tobacco, in line with the 'less harm, less tax' principle and the goals of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

Proposed by the European Commission in 2025, the revised directive aims to reflect developments in the tobacco market by extending its scope to products such as e-cigarettes, heated tobacco and nicotine pouches. These would be subject to new minimum taxes adjusted to Member States' economic conditions. The proposal also seeks stronger controls on raw tobacco to prevent diversion into the illicit supply chain. Under the special legislative procedure, the Council must adopt the proposal unanimously after consulting the European Parliament. (mp/ll)



EU NEEDS TO ESTABLISH CLEAR VISION FOR FUTURE OF ITS ENERGY SYSTEM

A secure and competitive electricity supply is the vital foundation that the EU needs to put in place as it seeks to protect its citizens and successfully revitalise its industry.

That is the firm conviction underpinning the opinion drawn up by **Christophe Béguinet** on [Energy connectivity, electricity grids](#), which was adopted at the EESC's February plenary session.

In the exploratory opinion, which was requested by the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union to re-examine the EU's ambitions for developing cross-border energy connectivity, the Committee assesses the future of the EU's energy system and more specifically its electricity infrastructure.

The opinion also identifies steps that need to be taken to make the energy system more efficient and solidarity-based for the benefit of all consumers – both individuals and businesses.

'Our energy system is a true cornerstone of European integration and securing its future demands an immediate common European response,' said Mr Béguinet. 'Our ambition and our mission are clear: we want to guarantee consumers access to quality, low-carbon, and above all affordable, electricity.'

To achieve these results, the Committee has put forward a number of recommendations, structured around three main pillars: a forward-looking mindset, a comprehensive approach and bolstering the security of the electricity grid. (mp)



THE EU MUST COMPLETELY RESET ITS ECONOMIC STRATEGY TO RESPOND TO NEW CHALLENGES

The 2026 European Semester is a turning point. If the EU wants to be able to respond to new global challenges, it needs to completely redefine its economic strategy and overturn its chronic lack of investment, which undermines productivity, innovation and its strategic sovereignty.

With its opinion [2026 European Semester - Autumn Package](#), drawn up by **Luca Jahier** and adopted at the February plenary session, the EESC takes a firm stand and is ready to fully support a European Semester which is worthy of common ambitions.

‘Europe cannot compete, innovate or protect its citizens without more investment’, said Mr Jahier, rapporteur for the EESC opinion.

‘Environmental, technological and demographic challenges are all interconnected and require a comprehensive and robust response’.

In the EESC’s view, the EU must offer a united response to the multiple challenges that it is currently facing, such as geopolitical instability, the climate crisis, the technological and digital gap and the demographic challenge.

More specifically, the Union must be ambitious and focus on competitiveness, resilience and social and territorial cohesion, all feeding into each other and working towards European sovereign sustainability.

To this end, in order to improve the 2026 European Semester Autumn Package, the Committee puts forward a set of 18 solid recommendations which can be summed up in five key political priorities: large-scale investments, integrated capital markets, strengthened economic and social governance, human capital as strategic infrastructure, and European cooperation on defence. (mp)



THE EESC CALLS FOR AN ISLANDS PACT TO SET OUT THE EU'S STRATEGY FOR ISLANDS

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that the challenges faced by EU islands are not adequately addressed by the EU's sectoral policies. Instead of being treated as peripheral territories, islands should be recognised as frontline regions for Europe.

The EU requires a 'systemic shift' to address the needs of islands. This would entail the development of a dedicated EU islands strategy (the Islands Pact), the EESC said in its opinion on [The Island Dimension in European Cohesion, Competitiveness and Sustainable Development Policies](#), which had been requested by the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The Islands Pact should be supported by a clear legislative framework (the Islands Act) containing an 'insularity clause'. This clause would systematically incorporate the specific needs and constraints of islands into EU policies on cohesion, transport, energy, State aid, the environment, and maritime affairs, said the rapporteur for the opinion **Ioannis Vardakastanis**.

The opinion is seeking to feed into a new strategy for islands and coastal communities, which the European Commission is expected to unveil in 2026.

The EU comprises a variety of island regions spanning the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. It also encompasses outermost regions in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. Finland's Lakeland region, with its thousands of forested islands, is the largest lake region in Europe.

These island and lake regions play a key role in ensuring Europe's strategic autonomy with regard to defence, energy security, and access to critical resources. They are vital for the EU's blue economy and climate resilience.

However, they continue to be impacted by persistent structural disadvantages, leading to a range of challenges, including isolation, melting ice, high transport and energy costs, housing shortages, labour shortages and excessive dependence on tourism.

Improving connectivity and infrastructure in island territories is essential for territorial cohesion. This means better transport, mobility, digital links and energy grids supporting decarbonisation and autonomy.

Island regions must also diversify through a blue economy based on marine resources, renewable energy, tourism, heritage and the creative industries.

The 'insularity clause' should apply to the National and Regional Partnership Plans under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, with measures on housing, transport, water and waste, climate adaptation, healthcare and economic opportunities, the EESC concluded. (mp/ll)



EUROPE'S SDG PROGRESS STALLS, NEW REPORT WARNS

Progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Europe has stalled, according to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2026 (ESDR) released by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). The report highlights stagnation and in some cases reversal on key environmental and socio-economic targets, alongside a declining political focus on the SDGs within EU policy-making.

The [7th edition of the report](#), presented on 26 February at an event co-organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and SDSN, assesses SDG performance in 41 European countries, including the EU Member States, the candidate countries, the EFTA members and the United Kingdom.

Although several European countries still rank among the global leaders on sustainable development, no country is currently on track to achieve all 17 SDGs by 2030. Major challenges remain, particularly in areas such as climate action, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and agriculture. The report also highlights growing socio-economic inequalities and a rise in material deprivation in some countries.

Nordic countries — including Finland, Sweden and Denmark — continue to lead the European SDG Index, but they also face significant environmental challenges.

The report warns that political commitment to the SDGs is weakening, with references to the 2030 Agenda largely absent from recent European Commission work programmes.

'At a time when the United States is openly challenging the SDGs and UN-based multilateralism, Europe must assert an independent foreign policy - one rooted in peace, partnership, and sustainable development in a multipolar world,' said **Guillaume Lafortune**, Vice President of the SDSN and one of the lead authors of the report.

'By harnessing the strength of its internal market and mobilising investments in green and digital technologies, the EU can reaffirm its commitment to the SDGs and build new alliances. The SDGs remain our most powerful framework for securing a future that is just, peaceful, and sustainable,' Mr Lafortune said.

'With less than five years remaining until 2030, Europe cannot afford complacency. Amid growing geopolitical instability and increasing social and environmental pressures, the 2030 Agenda must remain our guiding compass. The SDGs offer a vital framework to enhance policy coherence, rebuild trust in multilateralism, and renew political ownership at both EU and national levels,' concluded **Stoyan Tchoukanov**, EESC member and its NAT section president. (ks)



NATURE CREDITS UNDER SCRUTINY: EUROPE'S TEST ON BIODIVERSITY

Europe cannot afford to treat biodiversity as a secondary issue. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework set ambitious global targets, but ambition alone will not restore degraded ecosystems or protect collapsing species. Delivery, not declarations, will determine whether 2030 marks a turning point or another missed deadline.

At the centre of the debate is the emerging concept of 'nature credits', market-based tools designed to attract private investment into ecosystem restoration. The EU has committed to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030, but the funding gap for biodiversity remains large, the EESC stressed in [an opinion](#) adopted in its February plenary.

Stable and sufficient funding, including from the EU budget, is essential, while harmful subsidies, such as those for fossil fuels, should be phased out. Private finance can help, but it cannot replace public responsibility.

'Nature credits cannot replace stronger ambition', said the opinion's rapporteur, Arnaud **Schwartz**.

Nature credits could contribute to closing the funding gap, but only if they are inclusive, science-based and fair, said co-rapporteur **Teppo Säkkinen**.

Above all, nature must not be commodified. Land grabbing and speculation must be prevented at all costs. Nature credits should prioritise ecological integrity over short-term profit. Benefits must be distributed fairly, helping to reduce rather than deepen inequalities.

The EESC advises against rushing into heavy legislation. Nature credits should remain voluntary and tightly regulated, without undermining ambitious national initiatives. Alignment with other EU policies, from agriculture to the circular economy, must be clarified to avoid unnecessary burdens, especially for small-scale practitioners. Exporting a European-designed system abroad may also prove complex, as governance models developed in Brussels may not easily translate to different contexts. Generating nature-positive impacts in global value chains will require responsibility and sensitivity.

This opinion was among the first examined under the EESC's **EU Youth Test**, a mechanism integrating young people directly into EU policymaking. Youth representatives contributed to the drafting process, highlighting concerns about environmental integrity, fairness and long-term impacts for future generations.

(ks)



BELARUS IS AMONG THE TOP TEN MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES FOR WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONISTS WORLDWIDE

The External Relations Section (REX) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on 23 February to address the alarming deterioration of trade union freedoms in Belarus. Despite sustained international pressure and the appointment of an International Labour Organization (ILO) special envoy in June 2025, the Belarusian authorities continue to refuse any dialogue aimed at restoring compliance with fundamental labour standards. Around twenty trade unionists remain imprisoned.

The debate brought together representatives from EU institutions and the ILO Special Envoy for Belarus, **Lelio Bentes Corrêa**. A central moment of the discussion was the personal account from **Aliaksandr Yarashuk**, Chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, who was recently released from prison and forcibly deported to the EU.

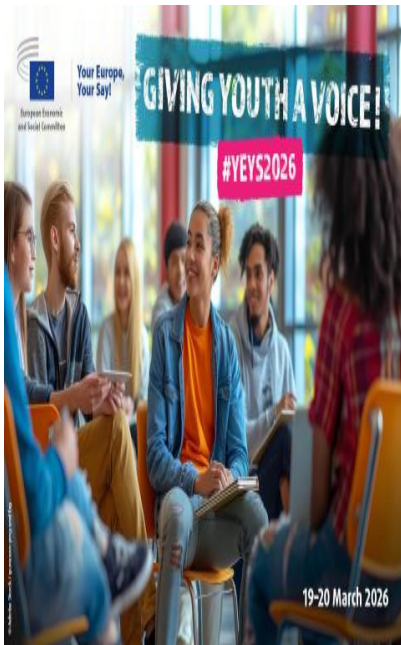
Describing the system of governance in Belarus as 'extremely cruel and vindictive', Mr Yarashuk said that even after his release he continues to cope with the consequences of deportation and confiscation of documentation. He warned that Belarus has become 'one of the ten most dangerous countries for workers and trade unionists', noting that the authorities had effectively eliminated the remaining trade union freedoms in 2022 through prison sentences and repression.

REX section president **Stefano Palmieri** underlined: 'Despite several releases of political opponents, the situation remains difficult. Beyond the detention of people there are also new forms of repression such as the removal of children from the families of targeted trade unionists.'

The ILO Special Envoy **Lelio Bentes Corrêa** explained that his mandate included engaging with the authorities to secure the release of detained trade unionists and restore recognition of the legal standing of independent trade unions. 'However, the Belarusian authorities have so far refused to recognise my mandate or enter into dialogue. To date, around twenty trade unionists remain imprisoned, while their families continue to face intimidation and pressure', said Mr Corrêa.

The EESC has steadily increased its engagement with Belarusian civil society in exile and with political prisoners since the fraudulent presidential election of August 2020. This has included statements, opinions drafted in cooperation with Belarusian experts, debates, and an online exhibition. The EESC's solidarity efforts gained renewed momentum in June 2025 with the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Belarusian democratic forces.

Participants concluded that the objectives remain clear: to secure the release of all imprisoned trade unionists, restore freedom of association, and re-establish independent trade unions in Belarus. (at)



19-20 MARCH: OVER A HUNDRED YOUNG PEOPLE COME TOGETHER FOR THE EESC'S ANNUAL YOUTH EVENT YOUR EUROPE, YOUR SAY!

Under the heading *Meaningful Connections, Active Participation and Democratic Engagement*, this year's of [YEYS](#) is welcoming secondary school students aged 16-18 and young adults aged 18-25 from EU Member States, candidate countries and the United Kingdom. Chosen through an open call for their motivation and civic engagement in their communities, the participants bring a vibrant mix of backgrounds and perspectives.

Over two days, more than 100 young participants are taking part in networking activities, interactive workshops and plenary discussions. Working together in facilitated groups, they are identifying key issues

that matter to them and are developing recommendations for strengthening youth participation in Europe. Their recommendations will feed into the Committee's advisory work on the next EU Youth Strategy.

EESC members step up their involvement in YEYS

In the lead-up to the event, EESC members visited the schools taking part in YEYS. Between 4 February and 16 March, members travelled across Europe to meet students, introduce the themes of the event and spark early conversations about participation and engagement. These visits helped set the tone for Brussels, giving the young people a chance to start reflecting on the issues before joining the discussions at the event.

These visits were not limited to the EU Member States. EESC members also travelled to EU candidate countries – from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania to Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Türkiye and Serbia – meeting students and setting the stage for the discussions in Brussels.

One visit stood out in particular: a trip to the YEYS school in Kyiv, where an EESC member met students face-to-face in the Ukrainian capital. Given the current context, this gesture carries real weight. It shows the EESC's determination to keep the conversation with young people going and to stand firmly for democratic values, civic participation and European engagement – even when the circumstances are anything but easy.

Now in its 17th year, YEYS is introducing a new element: the active involvement of EESC members throughout the event. This year, members didn't just visit participating schools across Europe; they are also taking part in networking sessions and workshops, sharing their expertise, giving feedback on young people's ideas and helping them turn these ideas into detailed, actionable proposals.

This new approach gives participants direct access to the knowledge and experience of EESC members, who represent Europe's diverse civil society. At the same time, it offers members a chance to learn from the young participants, hear their concerns first hand and better understand how to make their voices heard through the Committee's work.

YEYS remains one of the EESC's flagship initiatives for engaging younger generations, creating a space where young people can share ideas, connect with peers and decision-makers, and contribute to the Committee's work on youth empowerment. (kk)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



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WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AS A DRIVER OF COMPETITIVENESS

By Christa Schweng, EESC Employers' Group member, former EESC president

At a time of demographic decline, skills shortages and rapid economic transformation, Europe cannot afford to underuse its human capital. Women's full participation in the economy and in the labour market contributes significantly to productivity, innovation and long-term growth. This is why promoting gender equality is not a social add-on, but a core economic concern.

Europe has made progress on gender equality, but the picture remains uneven. Economic participation still lags behind educational parity, and women remain under-represented as entrepreneurs, investors and business leaders. Women account for only a minority of self-employed people and an even smaller share of company founders and top

decision-makers.

This represents a missed economic opportunity as many obstacles remain, one of which is access to finance: too many viable women-led projects still struggle to obtain credit or investment, despite their economic potential. We need practical solutions to improve women's access to financing, foster entrepreneurship and strengthen women's role across the business ecosystem – as founders, managers and investors. Another obstacle is care for children or older family members, which is still mainly seen as a woman's duty. Sharing care work more equally between women and men and providing public care-facilities will support women's economic participation.

Education, skills and career choices also matter. Gender gaps often emerge early, driven by stereotypes and lower numbers of women in technical and future-oriented sectors. Encouraging girls and women to pursue diverse educational and professional paths, and supporting lifelong learning and access to training, is essential both to close these gaps and to meet labour market needs. At the same time, gender equality policies must be compatible with business reality. Measures should be effective, proportionate and workable for companies of all sizes, especially SMEs.

By combining economic ambition with practical solutions, we will continue to support women's empowerment as a strategic investment in Europe's competitiveness, prosperity and resilience.



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WOMEN'S DAY IN A WORLD IN CRISIS: MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

By the EESC Workers' Group

Our world stands on the edge, trapped and sandwiched between old oligarchs and autocrats desperate to leave their mark on history before they disappear. Women's rights, won with great hardship in many places, and still missing in many others, are under threat. These rights, from reproductive to political, are a good indicator of the state of human rights as a whole: those who take away the former will sooner or later abolish the latter as well.

While defending women's rights, and human rights more broadly, is everyone's duty, female representation is fundamental. The global stage increasingly resembles a playground full of insecure teenagers armed with nuclear weapons, while the technologies that increasingly shape how we think and interact are being designed within a troubling 'techbro' culture.

AI-generated imagery and deepfakes are now widely used to create non-consensual content and enable harassment campaigns targeting women and girls online. These tools amplify forms of abuse that women have long faced on the internet, making such attacks easier and faster to produce, while proper moderation remains largely inadequate and access to justice often very limited.

This is why having women in positions of power is not just a matter of fairness (after all, women make up half the population), but also a better approach to governance and society. In an ideal world, this difference might not exist. In the real world, however, so many vital social functions, such as care, reproduction, feeding and other essential roles, have long been undervalued or ignored by a male-dominated society. So many of the key components that keep the world running are barely recognised, or are even openly treated as a burden, even in today's society. The very fact that giving birth still disproportionately affects women's careers and lives, and that the labour market continues to discourage it, despite its fundamental importance for society's survival, is just one example.

Building a better society must therefore be a collective effort – created with everyone and for everyone. This is one of our key priorities in the Workers' Group, both within and beyond labour matters. It is also why we practice what we preach: we have **Lucie Studničná** as our President and we elected **Marija Hanževački** as EESC Vice-President, and we have finally achieved gender balance in our membership. We need every perspective in order to build a credible alternative to the outdated world of chest-thumping and muscle-flexing that is threatening to return.



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INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF VOLUNTEERS 2026 - EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND WOMEN THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

By **Pavel Trantina**, member of the **EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group**

'Every Contribution Matters' is the guiding theme of the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development 2026 (IVY 2026), officially launched by the United Nations on 5 December 2025. This powerful message reflects a global reality: more than 2.1 billion volunteers worldwide give their time, skills and energy to foster solidarity, strengthen humanity and drive positive change. Their contributions are indispensable to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, responding effectively to humanitarian crises and building resilient, inclusive communities.

IVY 2026 is both a celebration and a call to action. It invites governments, United Nations entities, civil society organisations, academia and the private sector to deepen their understanding of volunteering, strengthen knowledge-sharing and better integrate volunteering into national and international development strategies. By doing so, volunteering can be fully recognised as a strategic force for sustainable development rather than a complementary activity.

Women play a particularly important role in volunteering worldwide. They represent a large share of volunteers and are often at the forefront of community initiatives, social services and humanitarian responses. At the same time, volunteering has been a powerful driver of progress for women's rights and gender equality. Many volunteers devote their efforts to supporting women's empowerment, combating gender-based violence, promoting equal opportunities and strengthening the voices of women in civic and public life.

For the European Economic and Social Committee, and particularly for the Civil Society Organisations' Group, volunteering is not a new topic. We played an active role during the European Year of Volunteering 2011 and its follow-up initiatives. We have supported the proper measurement of volunteering in line with the International Labour Organization methodology, contributed significantly to shaping the European Solidarity Corps programme, initiated several EESC opinions, commissioned a study on emerging trends in volunteering and organised multiple conferences on the topic. Throughout these efforts, we have consistently advocated stronger enabling environments for volunteers and their organisations.

IVY 2026 offers a new opportunity to build on this legacy. Our objectives are clear: to highlight the transformative power of volunteering, encourage sustained investment, create supportive policy frameworks and secure firm commitments from all stakeholders to strengthen volunteering ecosystems that enable community action to thrive.

Will you join us in making IVY 2026 a meaningful and lasting success?

IN FOCUS: GENDER EQUALITY



CHAMPIONING WOMEN'S VOICES: HOW THE EESC MARKED INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2026

To mark International Women's Day 2026 (IWD2026), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) rolled out a programme of events and communications focusing on women's roles in media, their experiences of harassment and invisibility, and the critical but often undervalued work they perform across Europe. The Committee's activities underscored a common message: women's safety, dignity and recognition are essential pillars of a fair and democratic society.

Through its [IWD2026](#) programme, the EESC delivered a clear and consistent message: women's contributions – whether in newsrooms, care roles or civic spaces – must be visible, valued and protected.

Strengthening women's voices and safety in media

The [EESC Equality Group](#) hosted a [high-level conference](#) entitled *Challenges for Women in Media – supporting and hindering factors*, examining the obstacles faced by women journalists and creators, especially those navigating online spaces.

In her opening remarks, **Christa Schweng**, President of the Equality Group, stressed the significance of the issue: 'Women in media continue to face structural barriers, targeted harassment, and persistent stereotypes... Gender equality in media is not only a matter of fairness: it is a matter of democracy, safety, and societal integrity.'

Speakers highlighted the persistence of gender stereotypes and the impact of online harassment, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence. They described how digital platforms, while offering visibility, have also become major sources of intimidation, threats and exploitation for women.

Participants also stressed that despite representing over 40% of journalists worldwide, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior editorial roles, weakening their influence on public narratives and newsroom culture

EESC Vice-President for Communication **Marija Hanževački** drew attention to the need for robust implementation of EU legal instruments: '*Regulation is needed so that women's safety and agency in offline*

and online media can be ensured.'

Experts called for full and effective use of the [European Media Freedom Act](#), the [Digital Services Act](#) and the [Directive on combating violence against women](#), emphasising the need for strong national transposition and civil-society oversight.

Belarusian independent journalist in exile **Hanna Liubakova** illustrated the risks faced by women in exile and under authoritarian regimes, pointing to travel restrictions, limited access to basic rights, and the psychological toll of state repression..

"When the authorities put me on the terrorist watch list, some people from Belarus started to ask me what I had done. It's painful to see how the regime influences people's minds," Ms Liubakova said. She underscored the transnational nature of this repression, which makes it difficult for journalists to travel safely without risking arrest in countries cooperating with the Belarusian regime.

A short wrap-up video of the conference can be [found here](#).

Invisible Work, Visible Impact: Recognising essential contributions

During [Civil Society Week](#), the EESC also hosted a [discussion on the largely unrecognised work](#) performed by women in Europe – from care and domestic work to essential services carried out by both EU and migrant women. This event entitled *Invisible Work, Visible Impact* placed a spotlight on how unpaid and informal work sustains households, communities and economies, yet frequently remains unprotected and undervalued.

Opening the panel, EESC President **Séamus Boland** highlighted the systemic neglect of women's labour: 'The absence of respect and the absence of dignity afforded to women – often migrant women – whose work is taken for granted, ignored and undervalued in our societies.'

The three key themes dominated the debate:

Unpaid care work, performed predominantly by women, is indispensable to European societies but often results in financial insecurity, isolation and reduced career opportunities.

Migrant women frequently work in undervalued sectors such as domestic work and long-term care. Many arrive with formal qualifications that remain unrecognised, limiting their employment opportunities despite acute labour shortages in essential services.

Long-term care systems depend heavily on both unpaid carers and migrant workers, yet policy frameworks still overlook their needs and protections.

Panellists called for better recognition of qualifications, fair pay, stronger labour protections, gender-responsive migration policies and long-term investment in care as essential social infrastructure.

EESC delegation at UNCSW70

The EESC marked International Women's Day 2026 not only in Brussels but also on the global stage, sending a delegation to the 70th session of the [UN Commission on the Status of Women](#) (UNCSW70) in New York. The delegation contributed to discussions on the year's priority theme – ensuring access to justice for all

women and girls – and highlighted the Committee’s work on equality, civil society participation and women’s rights. The EESC also [adopted a resolution](#) on UNCSW70 in the run-up to the event.

To accompany the EESC’s presence at UNCSW70, EESC Vice-President for Budget **Alena Mastantuono** recorded a dedicated [video message](#) underlining the importance of strong institutions, inclusive justice systems and continued international cooperation in advancing gender equality. (Im)



MISOGYNY IN THE SERVICE OF IMPERIALISM: RUSSIA'S WAR ON WOMEN CANNOT BE IGNORED

In her acclaimed book-length essay, *Same River, Twice: Putin's War on Women*, the award-winning Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen warns that misogyny is a foundation of state power in Russia, where traditional values are used to silence women and domestic violence legalisation has been relaxed. However, its goals are much broader: its international aim is to offer empathy and a spiritual haven for authoritarian rulers and misogynists around the world, threatening the rights of women and minorities globally. In Ukraine, misogyny is an instrument of war,

and sexual violence perpetrated by Russian soldiers has genocidal intent, Sofi Oksanen tells EESC Info.

***Same River, Twice* intertwines your family’s history with a century-long pattern of Russian aggression toward women. How does this personal historical lens help us understand the continuity of misogynistic state violence, and what responsibilities do you think the international community bears in confronting this legacy?**

One thing is that I took seriously the changes in Russian legislation, for instance. At the same time, it seems not even Russians themselves really understood them, and many were confused, but that was exactly the point.

For instance, the gay propaganda laws and foreign agent laws: they are all rather vague, and I remember many people in the West even laughing at them, because they were so weird.

Even Western media seemed to consider them somehow toothless. But these laws did not precisely define what could be said or shown. That was precisely why they were effective: the possibility of arbitrariness was part of their mechanism. If the authorities wished, they could use the law against virtually anyone. For the LGBTQ+ community, the law signalled that visibility was a risk. And when the visibility of a certain group becomes a risk, the next step is to broaden this practice to another group. And another group. And another group.

The oppression of sexual and gender minorities must be seen as part of a broader whole. It is not merely a matter of the mistreatment of particular groups of people, but of humanity as such. Throughout history, persecution has first targeted the most vulnerable group. The repression has then been expanded until it has come to affect all citizens.

When the legal protection of Russian women was relaxed, others in the West, I guess, thought it didn't concern them.

When they started to hail Stalin as a great leader, others in the West, I guess, thought it didn't concern them.

When they started to distort history, others in the West thought it didn't concern them.

Until it did.

To me, all this also tells us that in the West, Soviet history is not well enough known. Or what would the West have said if Germany had suddenly had a leader with a Gestapo-background?

Yet, it was totally fine that the Russian Federation suddenly had a KGB man as president.

The only way to stop this tradition of violence is to stop Russia's impunity.

At present, 'peace talks' don't really touch much on this issue.

If that is the case, sustainable peace is just a dream.

Your essay argues that misogyny is a core pillar of Putin's regime. Could you walk us through how this misogyny is woven into the state's ideology and institutions, and give concrete examples of how it shapes policy and propaganda?

Russia is not alone in its misogynistic project: its international aim is to offer empathy and a spiritual haven for authoritarian rulers and misogynists of the world. Even in the most egalitarian democracies, there is misogyny, homophobia and racism. Russia empowers and supports those who hold these opinions, incubating like-minded communities abroad. So, this is its aim on the international scene, and this is a key component of its foreign policy.

The Soviet Union had an ideology to export and expand its influence abroad. Communist ideology might sound attractive on paper. But now Russia is in a different position, and it has understood that misogyny is, for them, a good export product. In domestic politics, the very same misogyny is used to keep women out of positions of power (see more below).

In 2017, domestic violence was essentially legalised when the legislation addressing it was relaxed.

The Orthodox Church has campaigned strongly for these amendments.

Patriarch Kirill has declared that the criminalisation of domestic violence was a foreign invention.

And then there is the education system supporting the gender roles and ideas blessed by the Kremlin.

The foreign agent law is another instrument, branding NGOs, human rights organisations and women's rights organisations as unpatriotic foreign agents.

All this sends a clear message about what a proper patriot looks like: a victim-shaming bully.

In Ukraine, misogyny is an instrument of war, colonisation, and imperial aims. It's a cheap weapon, and efficient.

In what ways does the targeting of women reinforce Putin's consolidation of power domestically?

It keeps women out of all the places where there's power. It makes sure women stay out of politics, economic power and public forums in general. The only women who are allowed to enter the public sphere are the ones supporting Putin's regime, like Maria Lvova-Belova, who is in charge of deporting Ukrainian children to Russia and their naturalisation as Russians.

In general, studies show that online hate speech targeting women makes women more hesitant to enter public discussions. In Finland, studies have shown that online hate speech already makes women less willing to enter local politics, jobs related to legislation, journalism and so on. If this is the effect of gendered hate speech in Finland, one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, what is the impact on a country where gender equality as such is considered a Western export product, corrupting Russian values?

The gender roles supported by the Kremlin in Russia are based on patriotic, military thinking, where women are supposed to stay at home and deliver babies.

At the same time, Western leaders are targeted by very misogynistic disinformation campaigns: in the Russian public sphere there's no space for positive female role models supporting gender equality.

You describe the sexual violence perpetrated by Russian forces as a 'systemic and genocidal' tactic. How does the regime deliberately employ rape and other gender-based crimes to achieve military and political objectives, and what impact does this have on Ukrainian communities?

What we know from previous wars is that the better command responsibility an army has, the better it is for women, or civilians in general. So, not all armed forces rape and torture civilians - they will not do it if they are not allowed to, or if there's punishment for these actions.

In the Russian army, there's a tradition encouraging looting, torture and sexual violence targeting civilians. If previous generations have never been held accountable for these crimes, how could the present generation even think they could be held responsible for them?

Over 90 percent of Ukrainian prisoners (including civilians) are tortured in Russian captivity. The methods used keep repeating the same patterns and tools, they seem to be especially keen on torture with electricity, and the same methods are used against women and men alike. Torturing genitals is common.

Rape is genocidal when you can show genocidal intent and motivation: castration is quite clearly genocidal. If you harm someone's genitals in a way that might affect their ability to have children, it's genocidal. Many witness testimonies describe how Russian soldiers comment on their sexual violence by saying sentences like: 'We'll rape you until you don't want to have sex with Ukrainian men anymore', or 'You won't be able to bear more Ukrainian babies into this world', and so on.

The main goal of the Kremlin is to destroy Ukraine as a nation, and a nation is destroyed by destroying communities and families, and that is exactly what sexual violence does.

Sexual violence can also be seen as biological colonisation as one of the consequences is the number of children born out of rape.

*Finnish-Estonian novelist, librettist and playwright [Sofi Oksanen](#) is one of the most awarded literary authors in Scandinavia. Her books have been translated into 46 languages and sold in more than two million copies. She gained international fame with *Purge*, a play turned novel and later adapted into both film and opera. Critics hail her as a mistress of human drama, who incorporates historical and contemporary issues that move the reader. Her most recent work is *Same River, Twice: Putin's War on Women*, a literary essay on colonialism and oppression, women, and war.*



@Bojan Mr?enovi?/fAKTIV

THERE IS NO STRONGER POLITICAL FORCE THAN WOMEN WHO REFUSE TO REMAIN SILENT ABOUT VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION

Every first Saturday of the month, groups of men kneel in Croatian city squares to pray for women to dress modestly and for men to reclaim spiritual authority in the family. Croatian feminist collective fAKTIV says the prayer vigils have meagre public support but warns they are part of a broader backlash against women's rights across Europe. We spoke with them after their traditional Night March for 8 March about the wider pressures shaping women's lives in Croatia and Europe: from work and poverty to reproductive rights, violence, and the rise of the far right.

The 10th Night March for 8 March, organised by fAKTIV, gathered 12,000 people – the largest turnout so far. Under what slogan was it held and what were its main messages?

The 10th Night March was held under the slogan 'Women – the Backbone of Resistance.' We know that women carry a double burden on their backs — we are the backbone of society, but also of resistance. We are burdened by overtime and unpaid work, the kind often described as a labour of love because it involves

caring for family and loved ones, housework, and emotional care.

The same applies during official working hours: women uphold the last pillars of the welfare state. They make up the majority of the workforce in public services, and social protection has a female face. All of these systems are underpaid and understaffed.

In such conditions, in a system that neither cares for nor protects women, we become the backbone of resistance because we have no other choice. That is why we marched – to show that the system cannot break women's solidarity, whether it means naming violence, standing with women workers whose employers and the state have owed them wages for decades, protecting a neighbour from an abuser, defending nature from investors and destruction, or taking a friend to a neighbouring country because she cannot obtain an abortion in her own country, where that right is guaranteed by law.

How do you interpret such a large turnout – does it reflect a growing sense that women's rights are under threat, or greater mobilisation and awareness in society? How do you assess the state of gender equality in Croatia and Europe today?

Thanks to continuous work and collective organising, for years around ten thousand people have marched through Zagreb on 8 March. This year there were more than 12,000 of us. We consider our greatest achievement to be the people who march, drum and sing with us, paint banners and volunteer as stewards. We brought the International Women's Day, historically a day of workers' struggle, back to the streets, back to the people, where it belongs. These are some of the reasons why people march.

At the same time, we live in a country where most salaries do not last until the end of the month. Public healthcare is underfunded, and social services such as kindergartens and homes for the elderly remain a privilege of larger cities. In Croatia in 2026 abortion is still most often spoken about in whispers, as if we were discussing a crime rather than healthcare. At the same time, organisations that want to ban abortion are announcing the formation of a new political party.

The new Minister of Labour is advocating raising the retirement age to 67 or even higher. In just one year, Varteks, the clothing manufacturer, has sold off its properties; Nama, the department store chain, has closed its doors; production has stopped at Gredelj, the railway rolling-stock factory; Alpina, the footwear manufacturer, has shut down its plants; the paper factory in Belišće has closed; and Benetton has left its factory in Osijek. Violence has become part of everyday life, and the number of people targeted by violence continues to grow. These, too, are reasons for marching.

Finally, we march to celebrate those who refuse to bend their backs. This year saw the first strike of foreign workers in Croatia. Women workers at the Croatian supermarket chain Plodine have refused to leave their union despite threats of dismissal. Across Europe we are witnessing the largest labour mobilisations in years, while antifascist and antimilitarist voices are growing stronger.

Every first Saturday of the month, men gather in Zagreb's main square to kneel and pray for women to dress modestly and to ask for guidance for men to become the spiritual authority in the family. How do you interpret this phenomenon? Do you see it as folklore, a local religious

movement, or a dangerous political gesture with wider social consequences?

The men taking part in the so-called prayer vigils are in fact advocates for banning abortion and divorce, for women's submissiveness and their return to the four walls of the household. They claim that our confidence threatens their masculinity simply because we dare to walk freely through the streets and demand our rights and equality.

They began their mission by kneeling in Zagreb's main square and have since spread to other cities. Their expansion and persistence are not surprising – this is a carefully designed movement that seeks to impose its views as social and legal norms. Financially secure and internationally connected, they import ideas from abroad and attempt to implement them in Croatia.

What their vision of society looks like can be seen in the example of Poland and the way the country has treated women in recent years. Abortion is banned, and in 2026 women are dying in agony as a result. At the same time, activists fighting for safe and accessible abortion are facing criminal prosecution.

The men taking part in the prayer vigils also clearly do not see gender-based violence as a problem, since they advocate pushing women back into the private sphere of the household. That means returning women to economic dependence on men, one of the main obstacles faced by women who want to leave abusive partners.

Of course they are dangerous, and we are already paying the price. In many countries this movement has entered the mainstream of the Catholic Church and official politics. Nevertheless, there is no ultraconservative movement that faces stronger public condemnation: on several occasions more than 70 percent of Croatian citizens have clearly shown they do not support either their politics or their messages.

Croatia introduced femicide as a specific criminal offence in 2024 (only four other countries treat the murder of a woman as a separate crime), punishable by 10 to 40 years in prison. Yet Croatia ranks third in the EU in the number of femicides. How do you explain this, and can the new law bring change?

At the 10th Night March, we asked precisely these questions: how many more generations must grow up in fear before physical and psychological abuse of women becomes a thing of the past? How many more decades must we fight before gender-based violence becomes history?

In the ten years we have been marching, numerous laws have been adopted, strategies written and conventions ratified. Thanks to women who shoulder the burden and tirelessly remind the system that inaction endangers women's health and lives, penalties are stricter today, and protocols and shelters exist. But the reality remains thousands of reports of domestic violence every year, rising numbers of rapes, women threatened by those closest to them, and women killed by husbands, fathers, sons and former partners.

Femicide is the tragically predictable outcome of previously reported violence. The warning signs are there, the regulations and policies exist, yet the system fails and protection never comes.

Hatred, violence and abuse are not isolated incidents or moments of weakness; they form a structure that sustains male power and female subordination. It protects the privileged while leaving women and others on

the margins to fend for themselves.

You also described the Night March as a struggle against fascism. What developments or processes lead you to believe that society is becoming fascist, and how do such tendencies affect gender equality?

Of course the Night March, as the largest feminist protest in the country, will explicitly address fascist threats in society and criticise a system that does nothing to stop them. Just as there is no antifascism without a struggle against capitalism, there is no feminism without a struggle against fascism. In Croatia we can no longer speak of occasional fascist outbursts; this is a continuous process that is becoming more widespread and more dangerous.

Hatred in public space and the media has become normalised. Public discourse is filled with disinformation and inciting lies, while the number of those suffering the consequences continues to grow. Foreign workers are attacked both in the Croatian Parliament and on the streets. Hatred towards Serbs is spreading, while transgender people are denied the right to exist.

Naturally, feminism and women's rights are a thorn in the side of the political right. But as we said at last year's Night March: feminism has no borders. There is no stronger, louder or more determined political force than women who refuse to remain silent in the face of violence, who refuse to bow down, who refuse to return to kitchens and church pews, and who defend their legally guaranteed right to abortion and stand in solidarity with those most vulnerable.

***FAKTIV** is a feminist collective based in Croatia fighting for women's labour and social rights, advocating for reproductive and sexual rights, and against gender-based violence.*



[EQUALITY IS ALSO ABOUT HAVING A SEAT AT THE TABLE WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE](#)

Created in response to the prevalence of 'manels' in policy debates and conferences in the EU capital, the Brussels Binder is now a trusted directory for conference organisers in search of women speakers. Their free database now lists 2000 women experts (and counting) across all sorts of policy areas. Although the initiative has already begun to shift habits in Brussels, the Brussels Binder - one of the winners of the 2019 Civil Society

Prize for Gender Equality - tell us the job is far from done: the EU will not close its gender gaps if women remain underrepresented in policy debates.

Could you tell us a little bit more about your story and purpose? How was Brussels Binder created and what prompted you to launch it?

Back in 2015, a small group of women working in Brussels think tanks began meeting informally to exchange ideas about the policy debates happening around us. In those conversations, we kept coming back to the same observation: women were still underrepresented on conference panels in Brussels.

That was clearly wrong in a city where experts from across Europe gather to inform and shape major policy discussions. Further research confirmed what we were seeing – panels were often overwhelmingly male.

So we created a practical solution: a database of women policy experts that event organisers, journalists and institutions could easily turn to. The database remains at the centre of our work, but today our activities are broader. We organise events, advocate for more diverse panels, monitor 'manels' and encourage panel organisers to make sure theirs has gender balance.

Your organisation was founded nine years ago in Brussels. How much has your database with female experts grown since? Do you feel you have made a difference with your initiative - are women experts invited to take part in EU policy debates more frequently thanks to your initiative? Do you have any figures on the current situation with regard to manels and the proportion of women speakers on panels?

Today, the Brussels Binder database includes an impressive 2000 women experts across a wide range of policy fields, and it continues to grow.

We believe we have made a difference. Panel organisers in Brussels are much more conscious today of the need to ensure their discussions are diverse. There is also a growing understanding that simply adding a female moderator is not the solution – something we have highlighted in our own campaigns.

We also run a reporting system where people can flag 'manels'. When that happens, we contact organisers in a constructive way, offering support and directing them to our database. We are increasingly seeing positive responses and commitments to do better.

For our tenth anniversary next year, we plan to analyse the available data more systematically and present a clearer picture of progress in panel diversity in Brussels.

The Commission has just unveiled its new Gender Equality Strategy. What are your views on the strategy?

It's encouraging to see the Strategy highlight the importance of women's participation in public and political life, and to recognise the role civil society can play in advancing gender equality.

At the same time, one pillar of a healthy democracy still needs stronger ambition: women's fair representation in public debate and policymaking. Equality is not only about protection and opportunity; it is

also about visibility and a seat at the tables where decisions are shaped.

The EU cannot close its gender gaps if women remain underrepresented in expert panels, media debates and key policy discussions. Continued efforts to ensure more balanced representation in public debate will be essential.

You have recently launched FORGE - Forum for Gender Equality in Europe. Could you tell us a few words about its set up and goals?

FORGE is a new coalition bringing together nine civil society organisations working on gender equality at European level. The Brussels Binder is a founding member, together with HerVoicEU and HerEU.

The idea is to create a stronger, collective civil society voice on gender equality in European policymaking. Each organisation brings its own expertise, networks and perspective, but we share the same goal: ensuring that women's participation, leadership and visibility remain central to decision-making across Europe.

With the new EU Gender Equality Strategy for 2026–2030, FORGE aims to contribute policy expertise and practical recommendations to support its implementation and help turn commitments into real progress.

In 2019, you were one of the winners of the EESC Civil Society Prize for gender equality. What did the prize mean to you at the time?

Winning the European Economic and Social Committee Civil Society Prize in 2019 was a very meaningful recognition of our work. For a small, largely volunteer-driven initiative, it was encouraging to see the importance of women's representation in public debate acknowledged at European level. We were, and remain, grateful to the EESC for recognising and shining a spotlight on our work.

The prize helped increase our visibility and also supported practical improvements to the project, including strengthening our database and expanding our outreach, training and community activities.

How can people support the work of the Brussels Binder?

First, use our database. If you are organising panels or events, it will help you find women experts.

Second, women experts can sign up to the database, making their expertise visible and helping ensure their voices are heard.

Third, organisations can become official partners of the Binder, where we work on initiatives together, or support us in other ways – for example by hosting events or inviting Brussels Binder speakers.

Finally, individuals – women and men – can join us as volunteer members and become part of our dynamic, committed community. We have a serious goal, but we promise fun along the way.

***The Brussels Binder** is the go-to resource for improving gender balance in policy debates. The Brussels Binder is a common good – a free database consisting of profiles of female experts based in Europe. It covers a multitude of sectors and it is constantly growing. It is a place where women experts connect and exchange.*



STOPPING THE SURGE OF DIGITAL MISOGYNY

Relatively new but rapidly growing, cyber-violence against women is an emerging form of gender-based abuse. From doxxing to deepfake technology generating non-consensual intimate or manipulated images, it can have devastating effects on victims. Dr Eleonora Esposito, a researcher and gender-based violence expert, spoke to EESC Info about the legal tools available to EU legislators to tackle perpetrators and the obligations that should be placed on social media platforms to tackle such abuse at its root.

Cyber-violence against women is a relatively new dimension of gender-based abuse. In your view, how has its rapid expansion reshaped the everyday lives and safety strategies of women around the globe?

Most forms of cyber-violence against women and girls operate along a continuum between digital and physical spaces, where harm that begins online can spill over into victims' professional, social, or personal lives.

For example, doxxing, the publication of private information such as a home address or phone number, can expose victims to stalking, harassment or threats in the physical world. Also, the non-consensual dissemination of intimate or manipulated images can quickly circulate online but can also affect employment prospects, educational opportunities and personal relationships. Victims frequently report needing to change jobs, move homes, or withdraw from public activities as a result.

Cyber-violence produces a chilling effect. Women increasingly adopt protective strategies such as limiting personal information online, adjusting privacy settings, moderating their presence on certain platforms, or avoiding controversial topics altogether. This dynamic is particularly visible in fields such as politics, journalism and academia, where public engagement is part of professional life.

In turn, when women observe the scale and intensity of abuse directed at others, they often choose to self-censor and disengage from online discussions. The result is not only individual harm but also a broader democratic consequence: the narrowing of the range of voices able to participate safely in digital public spaces.

Deep-fake technology using AI now allows perpetrators to generate non-consensual intimate imagery from a single photograph. Are there practical measures that you think could curb this alarming trend in the short term?

In the EU context, the Digital Services Act (DSA) already requires Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) to implement effective measures to address illegal and harmful content. In particular, VLOPs are required to assess systemic risks, including those affecting fundamental rights, and to adopt proportionate mitigation measures, such as improving content moderation systems. In addition, the DSA obliges all platforms to provide user-friendly notice-and-action mechanisms for reporting illegal content and prioritises reports from trusted flaggers. Together, these provisions create a framework that pushes platforms to strengthen detection and removal systems, including automated tools where appropriate.

The AI Act also introduces transparency obligations for synthetic content and requires that AI-generated or manipulated content, including deepfakes, be clearly disclosed or labelled as artificial. To support implementation, the European Commission is developing a Code of Practice on the marking and labelling of AI-generated content.

Explicitly criminalising non-consensual intimate imagery, including AI-generated content, helps close existing gaps in legal systems across the EU and provides a stronger deterrent. At EU level, the new Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence is particularly relevant, as it introduces EU-wide criminalisation of certain forms of cyber violence, including the non-consensual sharing of intimate material.

Closer cooperation between platforms, law enforcement and trusted organisations is the most effective way to accelerate detection, takedown processes and the preservation of evidence, reducing the harm caused to victims.

You were Project Manager of the 2022 EU-wide ['Cyber-Violence against Women and Girls'](#) initiative at the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which helped build a continent-level measurement framework. Which indicators or methodological steps proved to be most decisive in mapping the problem?

Across the EU, legal and statistical definitions vary significantly. Establishing common conceptual categories is a key step in enabling more comparable data collection across Member States.

The framework relies on sex-disaggregated data and a gender perspective in data collection. Recording the sex of both victims and perpetrators, as well as the relationship between them, allows researchers to identify patterns of gender-based violence in online abuse.

A multi-source methodology has proven necessary. Surveys, police records, social services data, and academic studies each capture different aspects of the phenomenon. Surveys are important because cyber-violence is often under-reported, meaning administrative data alone would underestimate the scale of the problem. Combining these sources helps build a more accurate picture of prevalence and impact.

Finally, the framework follows victim-centred and intersectional principles. Data collection needs to account for the diverse experiences of women, including those facing multiple forms of discrimination, and to capture the continuum between online and offline violence. Recognising these intersections helps ensure that measurement reflects the real dynamics of digital gender-based abuse rather than treating it as a purely technical issue.

The project's policy brief offers evidence-based recommendations for online platforms. What are the most impactful changes you would like to see from social media companies, and how can their compliance be monitored within the EU framework?

The most impactful change would be a shift from reactive moderation to prevention by design. Platforms should build stronger safeguards against gender-based abuse into their systems from the start, better detection of coordinated harassment, faster removal of non-consensual content, stronger protection for repeat targets, and safer default settings for privacy and contactability.

As for monitoring compliance, the EU now has a more concrete toolbox than before. Under the DSA, compliance can be scrutinised through risk assessments, transparency obligations, independent audits and data access powers, thanks to enforcement by the European Commission and national Digital Services Coordinators. These authorities can request information, inspect compliance and impose sanctions where platforms fail to meet their obligations.

***Dr. Eleonora Esposito** is a Researcher at the Institute for Culture and Society (University of Navarra, Spain) and currently serves as a Seconded National Expert at the European Commission (Unit F3 - Protection of Minors and other Societal Risks, DG CONNECT). In this role, she contributes to the enforcement of the Digital Services Act and acts as Team Leader for work on gender-based violence as a systemic risk under the DSA. Prior to joining the Commission, she worked at the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) as a researcher in the Gender-Based Violence Unit, where she served as Project Manager for the portfolio on cyber violence against women and girls.*



THE POWER OF WOMEN IN ACTION: FROM A GLOBAL MISSION TO LOCAL CHANGE

EESC member Lidija Pavić-Rogošić writes about the Croatian branch of Soroptimist International – the global network of professional women united by a shared mission: to educate, empower, and enable women and girls to improve their lives. In Croatia, Soroptimists have launched several projects supporting women, ranging from entrepreneurship and leadership initiatives to a mindfulness programme for women with breast cancer and help for victims of domestic abuse rebuilding their lives.

[Soroptimist International Club Zagreb Centar](#) operates as part of the global volunteer organisation [Soroptimist International](#), founded in 1921 and now present in more than one hundred countries, and bringing together around 65,000 women volunteers. The movement's mission focuses on empowering women and girls through education, creating opportunities, advocating for equality, and strengthening their position in society.

The Zagreb club brings this mission into the local context through projects that connect the professional expertise of its members with community needs and provide support to women in different life situations.

Croatian Soroptimists launched a particularly notable partnership initiative supporting women entrepreneurs in the town of Glina and its surroundings in central Croatia, a region heavily hit by an earthquake in late 2020. The Zagreb Centar Club has built trust and strengthened local capacities in the area through workshops, mentoring, and support in creating a website and Facebook page. For this work, the Club received the Soroptimist International Europe Award, confirming the value of its approach to empowering and supporting women.

Another important step forward is the [R.I.S.E. Leadership Academy](#), implemented in cooperation with the Soroptimist Club from Maribor. The program brought together around twenty young participants from different professions and life experiences from Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye. Its aim is to encourage young women and girls to take on leadership roles, strengthen their communication and organisational skills, and connect them with mentors who can support their further development. The Academy, where R.I.S.E. stands for Resilience, Influence, Strength, and Empowerment, has become a space for learning, support, and mutual empowerment, as well as an example of how cooperation between two clubs can create a programme with regional reach and lasting impact.

The Zagreb Centar Club has also developed a project focused on the emotional and psychological well-being of women. A mindfulness programme for the association St. Agatha, supporting women diagnosed with breast cancer, provided a safe space for calming the mind, strengthening inner resources, and coping more easily with the challenges of treatment. Through guided exercises and support, participants developed resilience, connection, and a sense of control over their inner balance.

Cooperation with a safe house in Zagreb further confirms the club's commitment to women in their most vulnerable life moments. The Club provides support to women leaving the shelter and beginning

independent lives. This work highlights the importance of continuous, discreet, and practical support that enables women to make a new start.

The common denominator of all the Club's activities is a commitment to volunteer work, the professionalism of its members, and the belief that change happens when women have knowledge, support, and the opportunity to act. The projects in Glina, the Leadership Academy, the mindfulness program for St. Agatha, and the cooperation with the safe house demonstrate how the global mission of Soroptimist International is transformed into concrete results that change the lives of women and strengthen the communities in which we live.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić is Vice President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group within the EESC. Architect by profession, she is director and founder of the [Croatian CSO ODRAZ](#) - Sustainable Community Development. She also serves as Vice President of Soroptimist International Club Zagreb Centar.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN EUROPE: PERSISTENT GAPS AND THE NEED FOR STRONGER SPECIALIST SUPPORT SYSTEMS



Nearly 3 000 women were killed in Europe in 2024, most of them by a current or former intimate partner. At the same time, women fleeing violence still struggle to find safe accommodation, while helplines receive almost one million calls from survivors per year. These are some of the findings of the WAVE Country Report 2025, a biannual publication by Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE). For EESC Info, WAVE gives a short analysis.

Violence against women remains one of the most widespread violations of human rights in Europe. Despite decades of advocacy and legal progress, the findings of the [WAVE Country Report 2025](#) demonstrate that, while women across Europe continue to face significant risks, the services designed to protect them remain insufficiently funded and unevenly distributed.

Published by WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe), the Country Report provides a comprehensive overview of women's specialist services in 46 European countries, including national women's helplines, shelters, women's centres, services for survivors of sexualised violence, and prevention initiatives. The report also examines emerging issues such as technology-facilitated violence, offering a detailed picture of the realities facing survivors and the organisations supporting them. A separate chapter examines femicide in Europe, presenting available data on gender-related killings of women and analysing gaps in monitoring and prevention systems across countries.

Persistent gaps in support services

Women's specialist services (WSS) are a cornerstone of effective responses to violence against women. These services provide essential support such as emergency accommodation, legal advocacy, psychological

counselling and long-term recovery assistance. The WAVE Country Report, however, highlights persistent gaps in the funding and availability of WSS across Europe.

One of the most critical areas concerns access to safe accommodation. Across the 46 countries analysed, 3,224 shelters accessible to women provide around 48,860 bed spaces for survivors and their children. While this represents an increase compared to previous reporting, it remains far below the minimum standards recommended by the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention. Only 12 out of the 46 countries currently meet the benchmark of one family place in a shelter per 10,000 inhabitants, meaning that the vast majority of European countries still lack sufficient safe accommodation for women fleeing violence.

These gaps have direct consequences for survivors. When shelters operate at full capacity, women may be forced to remain in unsafe environments, travel long distances to access protection, or face further risks through sofa-surfing or even sleeping on the street. Limited shelter capacity also places significant pressure on frontline organisations already working under constrained resources.

Helplines are another crucial entry point for survivors seeking support. By 2024, 39 out of 46 European countries (85%) reported having at least one national women's helpline, with most operating free of charge and available 24 hours a day. These services collectively received nearly one million calls in 2024, demonstrating both the scale of the problem and the central role of helplines in connecting survivors with assistance.

The realities faced by frontline organisations

Women's specialist services remain the backbone of support for survivors across Europe. Many shelters, counselling centres and helplines were established by feminist civil society organisations and continue to operate through survivor-centred, rights-based approaches grounded in decades of expertise.

However, the Country Report shows that many of these services operate under difficult conditions. Although most shelters receive some form of state or municipal funding, financial support is often short-term, project-based, or insufficient for long-term planning. This creates uncertainty for organisations as they struggle to maintain staffing levels, expand services, or respond to increasing demand.

Women's centres play a particularly important role in providing non-residential support, including legal advice, psychological counselling and advocacy. Across Europe, at least 3,401 women's centres are currently operating, but this still represents a major gap compared to recommended levels of service provision. On average, Europe has one centre for every 129,329 women, reflecting a shortfall of approximately 61% compared to recommended coverage levels.

These services are often the first place women turn when seeking help, especially if they are not yet ready or able to leave an abusive situation.

Emerging forms of violence

Alongside long-standing forms of gender-based violence, new challenges are emerging that require urgent attention from policymakers. One of the most significant developments highlighted in the WAVE Country Report 2025 is the rapid growth of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TFVAWG).

Across Europe, 37 out of 46 countries reported an increase in technology-facilitated violence over the past two years. In nine countries, respondents to WAVE's survey could not give a definitive answer, mainly

because such data is not systematically collected. The most commonly reported forms include cyberstalking, digital surveillance and spyware, as well as online harassment, hate speech and threats. Image-based abuse, including the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, is also increasingly reported.

These forms of TFVAWG often intersect with offline abuse. Perpetrators may use digital tools to monitor victims, share intimate material without consent, or continue harassment long after a relationship has ended. Survivors frequently face barriers to reporting these crimes, including stigma, uncertainty about where to seek support, limited awareness among police and justice actors of existing legal protections, and the frequent absence of adequate legal frameworks to address tech-facilitated violence against women.

Women in public roles, such as journalists, politicians and human rights defenders, are particularly targeted by coordinated online attacks intended to silence or discredit them.

The continued reality of femicide

The most extreme form of violence against women remains femicide, the gender-related killing of women and girls. Data gathered by WAVE delegates and national experts indicates that at least 2,871 women were victims of femicide in Europe in 2024, based on data available from 35 countries.

In countries where additional information was available, 76% of victims were killed by a current or former intimate partner, a stark reminder of the far too frequent lethal consequences of domestic violence. However, the report emphasises that these numbers likely represent minimum estimates due to the continued lack of consistent monitoring and data collection across Europe.

In many countries, femicide data is primarily collected by feminist civil society organisations rather than state institutions, reflecting ongoing gaps in official monitoring systems.

The need for stronger political commitment

Europe has taken important steps to address violence against women in recent years, including the adoption of the EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence in 2024. However, the WAVE Country Report 2025 makes clear that legislation alone is not sufficient.

Ensuring effective protection for survivors requires sustained political commitment, adequate funding for women's specialist services, and the full implementation of existing legal frameworks, including the Istanbul Convention.

Women's organisations across Europe have demonstrated extraordinary resilience and dedication in supporting survivors and advocating for change. Strengthening and sustaining their work is essential if Europe is to move closer to a future where all women and girls can live free from violence.

[WAVE \(Women Against Violence Europe\)](#) is a feminist network of over 160 women's specialist organisations working to end violence against women and girls across Europe. Based in Vienna, WAVE strengthens the capacity of women's support services and advocates for survivor-centred policies through research, advocacy, and training. Its flagship publication, the WAVE Country Report, monitors the availability and quality of women's specialist services across Europe.



[A CAMPAIGN OF SOLIDARITY FOR IMPRISONED BELARUSIAN JOURNALIST KATSIARYNA ANDREYEVA](#)

Hanna Liubakova, an independent Belarusian journalist in exile, is calling for a solidarity campaign to free her compatriot, journalist Katsiaryna Andreyeva, who is currently serving an eight-year sentence for livestreaming the government crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Minsk in 2020.

'My brilliant friend and colleague Katsiaryna Andreyeva is still imprisoned. Her crime was telling the truth. I am asking for a campaign of solidarity to secure her release,' Ms Liubakova said in a [video testimony](#), published by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

The Polish-Belarus film 'Under the Grey Sky', which had been screened at the EESC and featured in [EESC Info](#), is inspired by Ms Andreyeva's story. A journalist with Belsat TV, she was initially given seven days of administrative detention on accusations of 'organising riots and disrupting public transport'. It later became an eight-year prison sentence for high treason.

Ms Liubakova was one of the speakers at the EESC's conference [Challenges for Women in Media - supporting and hindering factors](#), organised for International Women's Day 2026, where she flagged the risks faced by women journalists in exile and under authoritarian regimes.

Herself sentenced to ten years in absentia for so-called extremism, she is on a wanted list in Russia and across CIS countries.

'In reality, my crime was journalism. This is what transnational repression looks like,' she said.

For years, Alexander Lukashenko's regime has been one of the world's top jailers of women journalists, not a ranking any country should be proud of, Ms Liubakova said. 'For women journalists, repression has an extra layer: threats, pressure on families and attempts to discredit us as 'bad women', not just professionals.'

Twenty-eight journalists remain behind bars in Belarus, a country where independent media are treated as enemies.

'This is because information is critical infrastructure - it determines whether society can resist propaganda and authoritarian control,' Ms Liubakova said.

'Supporting independent media is not a charity. It is an investment in Europe's democratic resilience,' she concluded.

You can watch the video [here](#).



NON-CONSENSUAL INTIMATE IMAGE ABUSE IS BOOMING IN EUROPE — AND WOMEN ARE PAYING THE PRICE

Posts with non-consensual sexualised images are mushrooming across the internet, targeting women in more than 90% of cases. Although EU law clearly defines the sharing of such images as violence, the implementation of the AI Act and other rules is stalling amid a broader deregulatory mood in Europe, Oliver Marsh of digital rights watchdog AlgorithmWatch tells EESC Info.

The rise of generative AI has made it easier than ever to create non-consensual sexualised images. How significant is this problem today in Europe, and who tends to be most affected?

It is hard to estimate the exact scale of the problem, but it is clearly significant. For example, various research has found thousands of ads on Meta platforms ([Indicator Media](#)) and tens of thousands of sexualising posts produced by the Grok chatbot ([AI Forensics](#)) – potentially even millions ([CCDH](#)) – appearing in a matter of months. And this is based on research into publicly accessible material – we do not know how much is being shared privately, for example schoolboys sharing modified images of their classmates ([AlgorithmWatch](#)). Regarding who is most affected, different research projects find that the subjects are usually women, whether in 80% or as high as more than 90% of the cases ([AI Forensics](#), [French Foreign Ministry](#)).

#These images are often described as a new form of digital gender-based violence. What are the real-world consequences for victims, particularly women and girls?

The EU has explicitly included non-consensual sharing of intimate images as a form of violence in its [Directive of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#). This is important in terms of using the Digital Services Act to address the problem (see below), as the rules there are explicitly supposed to address gender-based violence as an example of systemic risk – and the EU is clear that non-consensual sharing of intimate images is violence under its terms.

I may not have the expertise to add much beyond what is available online about how this affects victims, but a point that is commonly noted is that just because the images aren't real does not make them less traumatic. Our [Journalism Fellow Ana Ornelas](#) has worked on this topic, I believe, including in discussions such as this for [Media Diversity](#). We should also consider how this is another threat against women doing activities which require a public profile, such as running for elected office. Though people are also subjected to this even without a public profile, e.g. by people they know, as mentioned in the AlgorithmWatch link above.

#From your research, what role do online platforms and algorithmic systems play in amplifying or enabling this type of abuse?

A lot of these images, and the apps or websites which can create them, are shared via platforms such as Discord and Telegram ([Wired](#), [Graphika](#)). There are also Reddit forums in which people share tips, such as how to 'jailbreak' popular AI tools to get them to make sexualised images ([Guardian](#)). Very large platforms such as X, Meta, and app stores can spread these to very wide audiences, including via ads. Such platforms can and should use moderation – both algorithmic and human – to find and remove the accounts doing this ([Indicator](#)). Some are better than others. From our research, we see that X, for example, does not even remove some clear and easy-to-find examples of accounts that help people make non-consensual nude images. Grok is an extreme example of how bad the problem is on X, but the problem goes well beyond Grok ([AlgorithmWatch](#)).

#The EU has recently adopted major digital regulations such as the Digital Services Act and the AI Act. In your view, will these frameworks be sufficient to address this issue, or do important gaps remain?

In theory, they provide a series of tools to (i) make companies conduct risk assessments and (ii) provide data and reporting options for external parties to identify when platforms fail to mitigate risks properly. The DSA could help ensure large platforms and search engines take measures to mitigate the spread of such images (and when it relates to illegal imagery, on other platforms too). The AI Act could potentially help address the creation and deployment of the tools themselves. For example, so far the EU Commission's response to the Grok case earlier this year was to say they are 'looking very seriously into this matter' and to announce further investigations. This is completely insufficient for such a serious failure by X. Also, together with others, we [were highlighting the issue of non-consensual nudity on X, and other platforms](#), for months before the Grok case. Implementation of the AI Act is being snarled up in a general deregulatory mood in Europe, exemplified in debates around the [Digital Omnibus](#).

#What role can civil society organisations play in protecting victims and pushing for stronger accountability from platforms and technology developers?

Despite how serious this problem is, there are still forces slowing regulation. Companies argue that forcing them to put safeguards in place holds back the development of their technologies. Many politicians and administrations in Europe are swayed by these arguments and are worried that Europe will 'fall behind' in AI if they try to regulate it too much. Civil society can be a counterweight to these arguments – albeit far less well-resourced than technology companies – and speak up against the harms when companies are not held accountable, ensuring that politicians and regulators actually stand by their statements that non-consensual sexualisation is a horror that must be strongly addressed.

***Dr Oliver Marsh** is head of Tech Research at AlgorithmWatch, where he leads research work and partnerships on policy areas including the Digital Services Act and the AI Act. He previously worked on platform and data governance as an official in Downing Street in the UK, and as an analyst of online harms for CASM Technology, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Demos.*



EUROPE'S EUR 250 BILLION BLIND SPOT: THE FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR GAP

If you are a woman living in Europe, you are 40% less likely to start or own a new business than if you were a man. Closing this gap could dramatically boost productivity by up to 5.5% in 13 countries by 2040. To compare, Europe's average annual productivity growth has stood at anaemic 0.1% over the past 15 years. Sarah Snelson from Frontier Economics, one of Europe's largest economic consultancies, shares with us the findings of their recent [study](#) on the potential of female entrepreneurship.

By Sarah Snelson

More than a year after Mario Draghi urged for a step change in European competitiveness, and with productivity and jobs remaining firmly on the agenda across the continent, a EUR 250 billion blind spot has been hiding in plain sight. Gender parity in entrepreneurship – capable of generating this additional annual value across 13 European countries by 2040 – represents a major source of untapped economic potential. This would represent around 2% of current gross value added across these economies.

On 19 and 20 March, the European Council will meet to discuss 'concrete commitments and timelines in priority areas to push forward EU competitiveness'. Coupled with the European Innovation Act's goal of creating an innovation-friendly environment, this represents a critical and timely opportunity to address the female entrepreneur gap. By improving access to markets, finance and infrastructure for female innovators, Europe will take a huge stride towards enhancing its global competitiveness.

We recently carried out some research, commissioned by Amazon, which puts a spotlight on this important issue and highlights the need for action. Across Europe, women are on average 40% less likely than men to start or own a new business. This gap rises to 88% in Denmark, while Austria and Ireland show smaller but still significant gaps of 21%. The consequences are more than symbolic. Closing this gap could boost productivity by up to 5.5% in 13 countries by 2040 – a dramatic improvement when compared with Europe's anaemic 0.1% average annual productivity growth seen over the past 15 years. If women started firms at the same rate as men, Europe could close the productivity gap with the US by up to a third.

However, hurdles remain. Nearly 40% of female founders cite both limited access to capital and regulatory complexity as significant barriers. Female entrepreneurs are 25% more likely than their male counterparts to report challenges with digital confidence. Care responsibilities present an even larger disparity, with female founders 36% more likely to cite this as a significant barrier.

If we support female entrepreneurs, will others fall behind? On the contrary, establishing measures to support female entrepreneurs would be beneficial to other SMEs. Unlocking this potential requires immediate, targeted action on five fronts: ensuring that national competitiveness strategies (including the European Innovation Act) support SMEs and female entrepreneurs; enabling access to funding for female founders; simplifying regulatory processes via the EU's single market strategy; accelerating digital skills

initiatives through Digital Europe programmes; and addressing structural barriers such as caregiving responsibilities and discrimination.

As a female leader with three children, I have seen how often we underestimate the latent capacity of entrepreneurs who don't fit the dominant mould. The case for change has been made on fairness alone. Now our analysis shows the scale of the economic opportunity it presents – and it's huge. Closing the female entrepreneurship gap is not just about equality, but about unlocking a powerful, untapped lever to boost Europe's productivity and competitiveness.

Source: '[Female Entrepreneurs: Europe's Untapped Competitive Edge](#)', *Frontier Economics*, October 2025. The report studied 13 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

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