



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,

I extend a warm welcome back to all of you. September always brings renewed energy and a fresh sense of purpose. While the challenges facing Europe have not diminished over the summer – indeed, arguably they have unfortunately intensified – neither has our collective determination to address them.

This month, attention across Europe was focused on the State of the Union delivered by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. In my response, I noted that the speech provided 'a realistic picture of the challenges Europe faces, while pointing towards a future in which our Union can be stronger, more resilient and autonomous.' The emphasis on

competitiveness, completion of the single market, climate resilience and safeguarding democracy highlighted many priorities the EESC has consistently championed.

I particularly welcome the recognition that the green transition and Europe's preparedness for climate-related challenges must remain central to policymaking. At the same time, this transition must be socially fair, protect workers and provide the conditions for businesses to innovate, invest and compete.

The proposed European Water Initiative and climate resilience measures are positive steps in that direction. In this policy space, I was very pleased to launch the Water Resilience Stakeholder Platform a few days ago with Commissioner Jessika Roswall and the Committee of the Regions EPP Group Vice President Carlos Moedas. This is a key milestone in translating the EU's ambition on water into action.

Another important aspect of the State of the Union was the focus on young people and the digital environment. Protecting children online and supporting their emotional wellbeing are issues that deserve sustained attention. The Europe we build today is the Europe our children will inherit. Ensuring they can thrive safely in a rapidly changing digital world is therefore a shared responsibility.

President von der Leyen also spoke about Europe's economic security and the need to rebalance strategic dependencies, including in relation to China. This is a discussion that came up in the EU-China Round Table in Hangzhou on 14 September, where I led an EESC delegation. We engaged extensively with China's Economic and Social Council on topics including trade, artificial intelligence and poverty reduction. While differences remain, dialogue and people-to-people exchanges continue to be the most effective way to build mutual understanding and identify common interests. A more balanced EU-China relationship is essential, but civil society engagement must remain a key part of Europe's approach.

Looking ahead, I will travel to Montenegro next month to meet political leaders and, importantly, representatives of organised civil society, whose engagement is essential to a successful enlargement process. Enlargement remains one of the EU's greatest achievements, but it cannot be driven by institutions alone. Civil society must be at the heart of it.

The EESC also continues to work closely with the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, reflecting a shared commitment that EU policies remain connected to the realities experienced by citizens, workers and businesses. I had the opportunity to address and participate in the informal meetings of EU employment and social affairs ministers (EPSCO) in July and agriculture ministers (AGRI) in September, where discussions focused on social inclusion and the future of livestock in the EU respectively. This engagement will continue in the months ahead, on topics including housing, equality and competitiveness, and intergenerational poverty.

A key moment in our autumn calendar will be our conference on poverty in October. Despite Europe's progress, too many people continue to experience poverty, social exclusion and insecurity. Behind every statistic lies a human story, and these stories are what motivate me. As Europe debates competitiveness, strategic autonomy and technological transformation, we must not lose sight of the social dimension of our Union.

The conference will bring together policymakers, civil society organisations and stakeholders from across Europe to discuss practical solutions and reinforce our commitment to reducing poverty and exclusion.

As this new season of work gets underway, I remain optimistic about Europe's future. The challenges are significant, but so too is our capacity to respond when we work together. The EESC will continue to play its part by bringing the perspectives of organised civil society into the heart of European decision-making and by helping to build a Europe that is competitive, resilient, democratic and inclusive for all.

Séamus Boland

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

DIARY DATES

28 September

[2nd Meeting of the EU-Chile Domestic Consultative Group](#)

29 September

[Fostering innovation and digitalisation in the construction sector](#)

[Liberal Professions Day 2026 – 10th edition](#)

30 September – 2 October

[European Public Diplomacy Days 2026](#)

1 October

[From Recommendations to Results: Is administrative capacity becoming the missing link in the European Semester?](#)

[Youth Policy Dialogue on COP31](#)

12 October

[National and regional partnership plans in focus: the civil society perspective](#)

16 October

[Islands at the Forefront: Harnessing Insularity as a Catalyst for Innovation, Transition, and Spatial Resilience](#)

17 October

[International Day for the Eradication of Poverty](#)

19 October – 30 October

[The EESC at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity - COP17](#)

21 – 22 October

EESC plenary session



TO THE POINT

Rural communities are central to Europe's prosperity, resilience and competitiveness. Embedding rural proofing across EU policy-making can help ensure that policies reflect local circumstances, unlock rural potential and create fair opportunities for all areas, writes Lidija Pavić-Rogošić, Vice-President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group and rapporteur for the [opinion on rural proofing](#).



RURAL PROOFING ENSURES RURAL EUROPE COUNTS IN EVERY POLICY

Rural areas are vital to Europe's prosperity, competitiveness, resilience and security. They produce our food, manage much of our land and natural resources and have enormous economic, social and environmental potential. Yet many rural communities continue to face demographic decline, limited access to services, connectivity gaps and fewer economic opportunities.

By Lidiya Pavić-Rogošić

As rapporteur for the [EESC opinion on rural proofing](#), I believe we need to change the way we look at rural areas. Their realities and potential must be considered across all EU policies, not only agriculture and rural development.

THINKING RURAL FROM THE START

This is what rural proofing is about: asking, from the very beginning of policymaking, how will this decision affect people, businesses and communities in rural areas?

At its core, rural proofing means helping policymakers ‘think rural’ throughout the policy process, whether in transport, housing, digitalisation, health, education, energy or climate policy.

Although various rural proofing mechanisms already exist, their application remains fragmented. The EESC therefore recommends a practical EU-wide approach, applied throughout the policy cycle, from design and impact assessment to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Rural proofing should influence decisions rather than become another administrative box to tick. Its purpose is to support better policymaking.

FAIR POLICIES FOR ALL PLACES

We also need better subnational data and rural impact assessments. Rural Europe is extremely diverse. A remote mountain community, an agricultural region, an island and a rural area close to a city may experience the same policy very differently.

The aim is simple: where people live should not determine the quality of opportunities available to them.

GIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES A VOICE

But data alone are not enough. Rural communities and civil society must have a meaningful voice. Farmers, businesses, workers, young people, local authorities and civil society organisations know the realities on the ground. They should be involved early, while policy choices can still be influenced.

Several tools can help, including rural observatories, better indicators, stakeholder consultations, co-creation processes and rural networks. We should also build on existing EU initiatives such as the Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas, the Rural Pact and the Rural Action Plan.

Particular attention should be paid to women, young people and other vulnerable groups, whose ability to stay in, return to and thrive in rural areas is often shaped by access to housing, services, jobs, mobility and digital connectivity.

UNLOCKING RURAL POTENTIAL

Rural areas are often discussed through the lens of decline. That overlooks their growing role in food production, renewable energy, innovation and climate action. Their potential in the bioeconomy, biodiversity

and entrepreneurship should also be better unlocked.

For me, the objective is simple: rural communities should not have to adapt to policies designed without their realities in mind. When policies reflect rural needs and realities, they are more likely to deliver positive outcomes across areas and communities, strengthen rural-urban links and support places in becoming more resilient. And when rural proofing reveals unintended territorial impacts, it should lead to real policy adjustments and better solutions, not simply another report on a shelf.



ONE QUESTION TO

The European Commission's initiative for a [*Simpler, Clearer and Better Enforced EU Rulebook*](#) seeks to improve the quality of EU legislation while reducing unnecessary administrative burdens. As Europe faces major economic, social and geopolitical challenges, we asked Kātrīna Zariņa, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on [*A simpler, clearer and better enforced EU rulebook*](#), how the EU can make its laws more effective, transparent and future-proof without weakening social, environmental and consumer protections.



BETTER REGULATION FOR A CHANGING EUROPE

Europe is facing profound economic, social, environmental and geopolitical changes. In this context, the quality of our regulation matters more than ever. This is the starting point of the EESC's opinion on the European Commission's initiative for [*A Simpler, Clearer and Better Enforced EU Rulebook*](#).

By Kātrīna Zariņa

The EESC welcomes the Commission's ambition to make EU legislation 'simple by design' and to strengthen regulatory discipline, but our message is clear: **better regulation should not be equated with deregulation**. The objective must be high-quality rules that are understandable, proportionate and effective.

This requires balance. Regulation should support Europe's competitiveness, productivity and capacity to innovate, while safeguarding social and environmental standards, workers' and consumers' interests and fundamental rights. Better regulation is ultimately about achieving these objectives more effectively.

One of the central recommendations of [our opinion](#) is therefore to improve how we assess the impact of legislation. We need to understand not only individual proposals, but also their cumulative and indirect effects on businesses, particularly SMEs, citizens and workers. The 'Think Small First' principle should be applied from the beginning of policymaking, while economic, social and environmental impacts must all be properly considered.

Better regulation must also apply throughout the legislative cycle. Significant amendments introduced by the European Parliament and Council should be properly assessed. Urgency procedures should remain exceptional, and meaningful stakeholder participation must be preserved. The EESC therefore calls for the 12-week period for public consultations to be maintained, allowing businesses, trade unions, civil society and citizens sufficient opportunity to contribute.

Transparency is equally important. We propose that new legislative proposals clearly summarise the obligations they create. We also call for greater transparency, stakeholder involvement and scrutiny of delegated and implementing acts.

What does this mean for Member States?

Good legislation at European level can only achieve its objectives if it is properly implemented and enforced nationally. More consistent enforcement should reduce fragmentation and strengthen trust in the Single Market. At the same time, national circumstances and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality must be respected.

The EESC supports tackling unnecessary gold-plating that creates additional burdens or distorts the Single Market, while clearly distinguishing it from legitimate national adaptations, including higher protective standards where justified.

Member States will therefore be essential partners in making better regulation work. This requires adequate administrative capacity, cooperation with the European institutions and meaningful involvement of social partners and organised civil society.

Better regulation is a shared responsibility. In a changing Europe, our goal should not simply be fewer rules, but rules that work better – for our economy, our society, our environment and, ultimately, for people.



THE SURPRISE GUEST

As Europe grapples with growing political polarisation, rising extremism and declining trust in democratic institutions, the debate about the future of democracy has taken on renewed urgency. Our surprise guest, Dr Małgorzata Bonikowska, President of the Centre for International Relations, reflects on the forces driving radicalisation across Europe and

on the crucial role that civil society can play in strengthening democratic resilience and rebuilding trust in an increasingly fragmented world.



BUILDING EUROPE'S FUTURE IN AN AGE OF POLARISATION

The election result in Saxony-Anhalt should come as no surprise. It fits into a trend that has been visible for at least a decade: Europe is shifting to the right and becoming increasingly radicalised. What was once on the political fringe is now often becoming mainstream reality: the brutalisation of public debate, increasingly extreme political positions, and the manipulation of negative emotions. In elections, those who use the harshest language and adopt the most uncompromising stances are beginning to enjoy the greatest chances of success. Why is this happening?

By Dr Małgorzata Bonikowska

The outcome of the elections in Saxony should not surprise anyone, as it is part of a trend that we have been seeing for at least a decade: Europe has been turning to the right and radicalising. What was once at the fringes of politics is often becoming a reality today – violent debate, extreme political attitudes, playing to negative emotions. In elections, it's becoming the case that those who use the strongest language and stand out the most have the best chances. Why is that?

Lech Wałęsa, leader of the Solidarity movement and recipient of the 1983 Nobel Peace Prize, has been saying for years that something has gone wrong in our western world: democracy and capitalism don't work like they used to. In European welfare states, the middle class has been shrinking for at least four decades. Economists – such as Thomas Piketty, author of the best-selling book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, who referred, not coincidentally, to the work of Marx from two centuries ago – are sounding the alarm that this will inevitably lead to discontent among society. And this frustration is leading people to reject past leaders and look for alternatives, which is when populists enter the picture.

This process may be inevitable. Perhaps Europe will not avoid a return to the past, which it has managed to forget. In 2018, when Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State in Bill Clinton's Administration, published her book *Fascism: A Warning*, Europeans were surprised. We believed that we had defeated communism, fascism and Nazism for good. Europe believed that this way of thinking and type of politics was a thing of the past.

Madeleine Albright warned that the echoes of these times could return in a new form. Fascism is not just an ideological theory from the past, but a concrete way to gain and hold onto power by sowing conflicts, exploiting people's anger and frustration, using hate speech and physical violence, claiming the right to represent an entire group or nation, and completely disregarding the rights of others. Is this what we are seeing in Europe today?

Europeans, accustomed to their civil liberties and high standard of living, are becoming increasingly frustrated by the problems facing the Old Continent. At the same time, the development of modern technologies brings new challenges and fears, and social media, which only recently had been seen as a key element of democracy is now becoming a tool to undermine it. A century ago, political violence was visible on the streets: paramilitary organisations were active, marches took place and clashes ensued. Now people feel like they can get away with anything online – hate speech can be spread anonymously, sentiment radicalised and political opponents taken down.

Russia is skilfully contributing to this chaos through large-scale disinformation activities. This is more effective than a military attack, because it can create divisions and pit us against each other, it fuels extreme attitudes that act as a springboard for politicians who propose to tear down what we have managed to build. Europe is in a state of war, both internally and with an external adversary. We have a difficult election year ahead, and in key EU countries at that: France, Poland, Spain, Italy, Greece and Finland.

What can we do in this situation? First of all, start thinking. Be guided by common sense rather than emotions. Common sense tells us that cooperation is better than conflict and construction is better than destruction. Civil society organisations, with the skills and structures to be able to reach voters, can play a huge role in a 'return to common sense'. There are lessons worth learning from the recent parliamentary elections in Hungary: if you want to convince people, you have to be active on social media, but also travel around the country and talk to people, convince them, reason with them.

As the Polish writer Sławomir Mrożek once said: Tomorrow is tomorrow's today. We are building our future now. Let's not let the coming months go to waste, because a return to the past will be painful.

Małgorzata Bonikowska, PhD is a Polish political scientist, EU affairs expert and President of the Centre for International Relations and co-founder of the THINKTANK Center for Dialogue and Innovation. A university professor, author and frequent media commentator, she specialises in international affairs, European integration and public policy.

THE PUBLIC SQUARE



TRUST FIRST: THE BEST DEFENCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION

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. This month, Johannes Metzler, Head of Communication

Consultancy at DW Akademie, reflects on one of today's most pressing challenges: the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

DW Akademie's Communication Consultancy team provides organisations and institutions with advice and training to help them communicate more effectively. What does this support involve in practice? How can this kind of support be of use to partners when false or misleading information is spreading?

First and foremost, successful communication depends on one thing above all else: trust. People only believe information if they have come to know the source as reliable and credible over an extended period of time.

This is especially true when dealing with misinformation and disinformation. Anyone who wants to effectively counter false information must have established the necessary credibility long before the crisis occurs. Organisations that communicate consistently and in ways that resonate with their target audiences are far more likely to be heard when it matters most.

For communication to be credible, many different factors need to come together: the right channels, the appropriate tone of voice, and, of course, the content itself.

At Communication Consultancy, we support our partner organisations across ten different but closely interconnected areas of expertise. That is why a single training session is rarely enough.

We always tailor our consultancy services to the specific needs of each organisation. We begin by jointly conducting a thorough assessment of the current situation: Which channels does the organisation use to communicate? Are the relevant target groups actually active on those channels? Is there a shared understanding of what messages should be communicated and how they should be communicated? What human, financial and technical resources are available?

Based on this assessment, we develop our support measures. Our goal is for partners to be able to continue implementing the strategies and tools we develop together over the long term, using the resources available to them. That is why we always adapt our approach to the organisation and the local context.

Disinformation is often associated with Russia, election interference and attempts to destabilise democracies. In what other areas can it cause serious harm?

Today, perhaps the more relevant question is: in which areas has false information or disinformation not yet spread and caused harm? We are facing a global challenge. Addressing it critically is a task for societies around the world. Reliable voices increasingly struggle to break through with facts. Consider areas such as public health, climate action or irregular migration.

The events in Ceuta provide a particularly tragic example. In July 2026, rumours spread through social media claiming that the border was open or that people reaching Spain would be allowed to stay. As a result, many people entered the water and attempted to swim across. Images of those who lost their lives in the Mediterranean shocked Europe. Misinformation and disinformation are a threat not only to societies as a whole, but also to every individual.

A wide range of actors are involved in spreading disinformation. In some cases, states deliberately disseminate false information. In others, groups or individuals do so because they can profit financially from it. Their motives may differ, but the effects are similar: they create uncertainty, fuel mistrust, and make it harder for people to make informed decisions.

These are not challenges that affect only countries in the Global South. Developing a critical approach to disinformation is a responsibility shared by societies worldwide.

You mentioned the case of Ceuta. From a communication perspective, what can institutions and organisations learn from this case?

In the case of Ceuta, it is still unclear exactly how and by whom the rumours that the border was open were spread. But, generally speaking, disinformation is often effective because it connects with people's existing beliefs, hopes or expectations. Individuals are more likely to believe claims that appear to confirm what they already think is true, or what they would like to believe.

Once disinformation is already circulating, the priority is to respond as quickly as possible, especially when lives may be at risk. Organisations should immediately refute false claims and reiterate the facts. If they

know their audiences and can reach them through the channels they use, this is much more effective than explanations or corrections coming from external sources. This makes it all the more important for institutions to build trust before crises emerge.

At the same time, we need to strengthen people's media and information literacy. Today, there are many excellent and often free ways to do this. A healthy degree of scepticism can go a long way in verifying information: Is the source trustworthy? Is the information confirmed by other sources? Is it a sensational claim, perhaps accompanied by provocative or emotionally charged images?

However, an even more effective approach than debunking disinformation is what is known as pre-bunking. This involves informing people about common manipulation and disinformation techniques and explaining how they work, even before a specific incident occurs.

How can organisations use pre-bunking to help audiences recognise misleading content and manipulation techniques before they encounter them?

From my perspective as a communications consultant, I can only say that disinformation is far too often regarded as 'a topic for media professionals'. In reality, it is not. Pre-bunking is a good example of why. The early recognition of false information is important for every organisation that deals with it, regardless of the sector in which it operates.

Much like a vaccine strengthens the body's immune system, pre-bunking strengthens people's ability to recognise warning signs and critically assess content when they encounter misleading information.

Organisations and institutions should proactively educate their target audiences about the most common manipulation and disinformation techniques. This can be done through short explainer videos, social media campaigns, media literacy training or interactive exercises that demonstrate tactics such as emotional manipulation or the creation of seemingly credible sources.

From your practical experience, what makes this cooperation work? Can you share an example from your consultancy work in which a communication strategy helped an organisation respond effectively to misinformation or disinformation?

Countering disinformation is not a task that individual institutions can solve alone. Effective responses require collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organisations, media outlets, researchers, and, importantly, local communities. Each of these groups brings different perspectives, expertise and access to relevant audiences.

This is why it is essential to maintain and actively strengthen networks over time. It is not enough to make contact only once a disinformation campaign is already under way. Instead, insights should be shared continuously, responsibilities clearly defined, and regular coordination mechanisms established. In West Africa, for example, we brought together and advised a diverse group of non-governmental organisations working in different ways to address disinformation. These included smaller youth organisations as well as a think-tank focused specifically on researching the phenomenon. We provided targeted training and also connected them with journalists. Such alliances are promising because participants often discover how much they actually have in common.

One goal is to set up an early warning or alert system that operates through personal networks and direct contacts, including phone numbers. When misleading information appears in one place, all actors involved can notify one another as quickly as possible. The earlier disinformation is identified, the more effectively its impact can be limited.

Ultimately, the objective is to build trust, communication channels, and collaboration during stable periods. When crises arise, that preparation pays off.

That is why one of our key goals is to train credible multipliers who can pass on their knowledge within their own networks and communities.

Johannes Metzler heads the Communication Consultancy unit at DW Akademie. Previously, he worked as a journalist for German media organisations and spent several years in Latin America supporting the development and advisory work of media organisations.

DW Akademie's Communication Consultancy team supports civil society organisations and institutions in the Global South in building trust, reaching diverse audiences, and remaining effective, even under pressure. Through tailored consulting and training, it helps partners strengthen their communication capacities. The approach combines media consultancy expertise with the practical experience of Deutsche Welle professionals, including journalists, fact-checkers, communication specialists and AI experts.

EESC NEWS



EESC LAUNCHES 16TH CIVIL SOCIETY PRIZE TO REWARD PROJECTS COMBATING POVERTY

Civil society organisations, individuals and private companies can now enter not-for-profit projects for the European Economic and Social Committee's 16th Civil Society Prize. This year's edition will reward innovative initiatives that combat poverty, promote social and economic inclusion and help prevent people from falling into poverty.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) plans to award up to three prizes: EUR 12 000 for the winner, EUR 10 000 for second place and EUR 8 000 for third place. Applications must be submitted by **10:00 CET on 6 November 2026**. The award ceremony is expected to take place during EESC Civil Society Week in spring 2027.

The prize is open to civil society organisations officially registered in the European Union and operating at local, regional, national or European level. Individuals and private companies or firms registered or operating in the EU may also apply, provided that their projects are strictly not-for-profit. Public authorities,

governmental organisations and other public bodies are not eligible.

To be eligible, projects must be carried out in the EU and must already have been implemented or still be ongoing on 6 November 2026. Initiatives whose implementation has not begun by that date will not be considered. The [full eligibility requirements](#) and an [online application form](#) are available on the EESC's dedicated [Civil Society Prize webpage](#).

Projects may address a wide range of challenges, including access to adequate income and social protection, affordable essential services, education and lifelong learning, and quality employment. Initiatives may also tackle in-work and energy poverty, homelessness, financial exclusion and the rising cost of living. Other eligible projects could get people experiencing poverty involved in designing solutions or respond to the specific needs of groups particularly at risk.

The EESC has welcomed the EU's first Anti-Poverty Strategy and called for ambitious action in areas such as employment, education, social protection, health, housing, energy and digital inclusion. It also stresses that people directly affected by poverty must be involved in designing, implementing and evaluating policies intended to support them.

Through its 16th Civil Society Prize, the EESC aims to highlight initiatives that uphold the fundamental right to a life in dignity, demonstrate solidarity and empower people to build a better future.(Im)



WHERE EUROPEAN POLICY MEETS THE LAND: EU COMMISSIONERS VISIT EESC PRESIDENT'S FARM

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) President Séamus Boland welcomed two European Commissioners to his family farm in Ballycumber, County Offaly, bringing discussions on EU enlargement, environmental protection and the future of rural communities to a working agricultural setting.

On 8 September 2026, **Mr Boland** hosted European Commissioner for Enlargement **Marta Kos**. Their discussions focused on EU enlargement and the essential role of civil society in preparing candidate countries for membership. The visit also provided an opportunity to consider how rural communities, farmers and civil society organisations contribute to economic resilience, social inclusion and democratic participation.

'Enlargement is one of the EU's most important strategic projects. It is about bringing people together around the shared values of democracy, solidarity and opportunity,' said Mr Boland. 'Successful enlargement must involve citizens and communities, not just governments and institutions.'

Ms Kos stressed that joining the EU requires not only changes to legislation, but also the transformation of societies. 'Governments have to lead, but we need citizens, farmers, businesses and civil society to make enlargement a success. Their voices must be part of the process from the very beginning,' she said.

The visit highlighted cooperation between the EESC and the European Commission to place civil society at the heart of enlargement, including through the EESC's enlargement candidate members initiative. This enables representatives of organised civil society from candidate countries to be directly involved in the Committee's work.

Environmental stewardship in practice

Ms Kos's visit followed an earlier meeting at the farm with European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy **Jessika Roswall**. On 23 July, Ms Roswall and Mr Boland discussed sustainable farming, biodiversity, water resilience and the future of rural communities.

'Today's visit showed how the European green transition is being delivered not only through policy, but also through the farmers who care for our land every day,' said Ms Roswall. 'They show that protecting nature and supporting rural communities go hand in hand when all stakeholders are part of the solution.'

Together, the visits demonstrated how EU priorities are put into practice through the work of farmers, rural communities and civil society, while underlining the importance of ensuring that EU policies deliver tangible benefits for citizens, businesses and communities.*(lm)*



EU ENLARGEMENT MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

At a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, EU enlargement is increasingly seen as one of Europe's strongest tools for enhancing security, stability and prosperity. That was the clear message from a [high-level debate](#) organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Commission during the EESC's plenary session on 16 July 2026.

Bringing together the **European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos**, political leaders and representatives from candidate countries, the discussion focused on how enlargement can help build a stronger, more resilient and more competitive Europe.

Opening the debate, **EESC president Séamus Boland** pointed out that enlargement is not only a political project: 'By advancing democratic reforms, as well as strengthening the rule of law and fundamental rights, candidate countries are contributing to our shared European security. Accelerating socio-economic convergence is essential for enlargement to deliver tangible benefits for citizens.'

Commissioner Kos stressed that enlargement has returned to the top of the EU agenda, and is helping reshape Europe's political and security landscape at a particularly challenging moment. Beyond its strategic importance, she pointed to the strong economic case for enlargement, noting that previous rounds have consistently delivered growth and opportunity.

A recurring theme throughout the debate was the important role of organised civil society. Participants agreed that reforms are more effective and sustainable when employers, trade unions and civil society organisations are actively involved. The discussion also highlighted the success of the EESC's [Enlargement Candidate Members \(ECM\) initiative](#), which gives representatives from candidate and potential candidate countries a direct voice in the Committee's work.

The debate concluded with a strong message: the future of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and other countries committed to becoming part of Europe lies in a united Europe. Achieving that goal will not only require political leadership, but also vibrant and engaged civil societies helping to shape the enlargement process every step of the way (pm).



EUROPE CANNOT ASK THE EU BUDGET TO DO MORE WITH LESS

The EU's next long-term budget cannot be reduced to a battle over numbers. At a high-level EESC debate with Siegfried Mureşan MEP, the European Commission, Germany's Federal Foreign Office and leading researchers, one message was clear: if

Europe wants to deliver on security, competitiveness, climate resilience, enlargement, cohesion and agriculture, it needs a stronger budget and better spending.

The key question for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework is not simply what percentage of EU gross national income it should represent, but what Europe expects it to achieve and whether it will provide the necessary means. The EESC's position is clear: new priorities must not be financed by hollowing out existing ones. Security and competitiveness require adequate resources alongside predictable funding for cohesion and agriculture.

As EESC rapporteur **Konstantinos Diamantouros** noted, the current MFF has also lost real purchasing power: its fixed 2% deflator has lagged considerably behind actual inflation. Meanwhile, divisions remain wide. Germany and like-minded countries want the Commission proposal cut by several hundred billion euro, while the European Parliament and the EESC call for a substantially larger budget. Europe's new and traditional priorities are not mutually exclusive; both must be financed.

Funding alone, however, will not ensure success. The Commission's proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans may simplify delivery, but the Recovery and Resilience Facility shows the risks of centralisation. CEPS researcher **Eulalia Rubio** warned that absorbing cohesion policy into broad national plans could dilute its territorial objectives. Regional authorities must retain a meaningful role where they have the responsibility and expertise to invest.

Organised civil society must also be involved from design through implementation to monitoring. Employers, workers and civil society organisations can identify weak implementation and help correct course. Their participation is not bureaucracy, but a safeguard for performance, and should be embedded in the MFF's rules rather than left to goodwill.

Europe must also change how it finances its ambitions. Heavy reliance on national GNI-based contributions exposes the budget to domestic fiscal pressures and encourages narrow net-balance calculations.

Philipp Heimberger of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies argued that investments located in one country often generate benefits throughout the single market. The EESC therefore supports new own resources, while distinguishing genuinely new European revenue from transfers of existing national income. Digital taxation and levies on financial transactions, aviation and crypto-related activities deserve consideration where they provide sustainable revenue and address cross-border challenges.

Ultimately, the MFF is also about trust. Citizens will support greater spending on competitiveness and defence only if decisions are transparent, regions are involved and new priorities do not undermine social cohesion. Trust requires meaningful participation and visible results, not better communication after decisions are made, ECO section president **Elena Calistru** stressed.

Europe should not have to choose between ambition and cohesion, flexibility and accountability, or European priorities and public trust. The next MFF needs all of them, and resources matching its ambitions. With the timetable exceptionally tight, the October European Council will be a crucial test. The EESC stands ready to keep organised civil society at the heart of the negotiations and delivery.



QUALITY JOBS AND FAIR LABOUR MOBILITY KEY TO EUROPE'S COMPETITIVENESS, SAYS EESC

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a plenary debate with European Commission Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu on how better protection for workers can strengthen Europe's competitiveness. The debate focused on quality jobs and fair labour mobility and was followed by the adoption of two related EESC opinions.

Against a backdrop of demographic change, artificial intelligence, the green transition and geopolitical uncertainty, the EESC stressed that Europe's competitiveness and social model must advance together. Quality jobs and fair labour mobility can help address labour shortages, attract talent, support the green and digital transitions and protect workers' rights.

'Europe's economic and social model can only be resilient if it is based on quality employment, effective rights, strong enforcement and trust. Quality jobs are not a luxury; they are a condition for sustainable competitiveness, for social cohesion and for citizens' confidence in the EU's capacity to deliver', said EESC President **Séamus Boland**.

European Commission Executive Vice-President **Roxana Mînzatu** confirmed that the Commission is preparing a [Quality Jobs Act](#), to be presented by the end of 2026 following consultations with the European social partners. She also announced that the posting of third-country nationals would form an important part of the [Fair Labour Mobility Package](#).

‘Both of the opinions that we are debating today speak to the same conviction – that the European social model and Europe’s competitiveness are not in opposition, that they go hand in hand – and that they will rise together, or that they will fail together [...] I believe that the EESC is uniquely placed to show that our social model and our competitiveness go hand in hand’, Ms Mînzatu highlighted.

Quality jobs as a foundation for competitiveness

In its opinion on the [Quality Jobs Roadmap](#), the EESC welcomes the Commission’s initiative and underlines that productivity, innovation, competitiveness and social progress must reinforce each other. It calls for a common European approach based on indicators covering pay, health and safety, skills, equality, working time, social dialogue and workers’ representation.

Protecting workers and ensuring fair mobility

The second opinion addresses the [posting of third-country nationals](#). While recognising the benefits of labour mobility and cross-border services, the EESC warns that legal uncertainty and uneven enforcement can expose workers to abuse and distort fair competition. It calls for clearer EU rules, stronger enforcement, better access to information and a reinforced role for the European Labour Authority. (Im)



EESC: CIRCULAR ECONOMY ACT MUST MAKE EUROPE MORE RESILIENT, COMPETITIVE AND INDEPENDENT

The future Circular Economy Act should place circularity at the heart of Europe’s competitiveness, resilience and strategic autonomy, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

stressed during a plenary debate with European Commission Executive Vice-President Teresa Ribera.

The debate built on the EESC’s [exploratory opinion](#), requested by the European Commission, which will feed into the forthcoming legislation. The Committee argues that circularity should be treated not only as an environmental objective but also as an economic and geopolitical strategy, reducing Europe’s dependence on imported resources.

Presenting the opinion, rapporteur **Cillian Lohan** called for a more systemic approach.

‘The Circular Economy Act should strengthen the EU’s competitiveness and resilience by accelerating the shift from a linear – take-make-waste – economy to a circular one’, said Mr Lohan. ‘This is essential not only for people’s well-being and prosperity, but also for our planet. In concrete terms, we propose that the Act strengthens European markets for secondary raw materials and integrates a resource-use perspective into all EU policies. Circularity must become a cross-cutting principle.’

As well as advocating a genuine single market for circular products and secondary raw materials, the EESC also pushes for clearer market signals and better access to financing, particularly for SMEs and social economy actors.

The Committee also stresses the importance of workers, businesses and citizens in delivering a just and competitive transition, alongside quality jobs and new economic opportunities.

Through its cooperation with the Commission and the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, the EESC will continue bringing civil society into the implementation of Europe's circular transition. (ks)



EUROPE'S LIVESTOCK STRATEGY A GOOD STARTING POINT, EESC NOTES

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the European Commission's livestock strategy as a positive starting point, but calls for stronger funding, mandatory labelling and strengthened competitiveness for Europe's

livestock farmers

In a [new opinion](#), the EESC stresses that the EU must go much further if it wishes Europe's livestock sector to remain competitive, sustainable and resilient. While supporting the Commission's overall direction, the Committee argues that the current proposals leave important gaps on financing, trade, labelling and support for farmers.

The EESC calls for a dedicated EU Livestock Fund outside the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), alongside a CAP budget restored to 0.5% of EU GDP.

'Supporting livestock farming is not just about agriculture, it is about Europe's food security, strategic autonomy and the vitality of our rural communities', says **Joe Healy**, the rapporteur of the opinion.

The EESC argues that the ongoing reduction in livestock production in Europe will simply shift production and lead to a significant increase in emissions to countries with lower environmental and welfare standards.

'We must promote Europe's high-performing livestock sector. Europe's livestock strategy needs dedicated financing to translate the positive narrative into tangible action on the ground. If we ask Europe's farmers to lead the transition, we must give them the tools to succeed and increase their productivity,' says **Florian Dalstein**, the co-rapporteur.

Furthermore, the EESC proposes mandatory EU/non-EU origin labelling for animal products, adequate funding and realistic transition periods for higher animal welfare standards, and dedicated livestock research under Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund.

The EESC also backs targeted support for extensive, regenerative, agroforestry and organic livestock systems and calls for an animal protein export strategy promoting Europe's high sustainability standards

internationally.

It stresses that imported products should meet equivalent environmental, animal welfare and social standards. (ks)



EESC CALLS FOR A STRONGER EUROPEAN STRATEGY TO PREVENT WILDFIRES

As wildfires become more frequent and destructive across Europe, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is calling for prevention to become the cornerstone of EU wildfire policy.

In its [latest opinion](#), the EESC welcomes the European Commission's approach to integrated wildfire risk management but warns that prevention remains significantly underfunded compared with firefighting. It calls for a structural shift towards long-term prevention and preparedness.

'Wildfires are no longer a seasonal challenge confined to southern Europe, they are a European civil protection emergency. Prevention must become our first line of defence, backed by a specific EU budget, professional training and a truly integrated European strategy. The cost of inaction will be measured in lives, biodiversity loss and the future of our rural areas,' said the rapporteur of the opinion **Luís Mira**.

The Committee proposes a specific European wildfire prevention fund under the next multiannual financial framework, separate from the common agricultural policy, alongside stronger cooperation between Member States and improved professional training.

The EESC also highlights the crucial role of active land management. Maintaining viable agricultural, livestock and forestry activities can help prevent land abandonment, reduce fuel accumulation and lower wildfire risks. Farmers, foresters, local authorities and rural communities should therefore be closely involved in prevention strategies.

The opinion also advocates greater use of innovative technologies and dual-use infrastructure, backed by adequate long-term financing. (ks)



DRONES – SECURITY AND AVIATION SAFETY MUST REMAIN TOP PRIORITY IN EU ACTION PLAN

Public safety and aviation must remain top priority when designing and carrying out new European drone security and counter-drone measures.

In its [opinion](#) adopted drawn up by **Miroslav Hajnoš** and adopted at the July plenary session, the EESC argues that the end goal of any future EU action on drones must be security and safety for people and aviation, preserving the operational integrity of the European Air Traffic Management (ATM) system.

The Committee backs the *EU Action Plan on Drone and Counter Drone Security*, calling the Commission's proposal a timely and necessary response to a rapidly changing security environment. The EESC specifically supports the goal of strengthening preparedness, detection and response capacities and deterring malicious drone use. At the same time, the Committee stresses that all measures must remain proportionate and consistent with fundamental rights, privacy, data protection, legal certainty and democratic accountability.

As already pointed out in the opinion on the [Drones strategy 2.0](#), proper coordination between the relevant authorities is vital. This means there must be a clear division of roles between civil aviation authorities, law enforcement, military actors and infrastructure operators. In light of this, the EESC cautions against any transfer of security or law-enforcement duties to Air Traffic Management personnel or other safety-critical staff. It therefore calls on the EU to set up a framework establishing intervention thresholds and permissible counter-measures.

Drones are becoming part of our everyday lives. They are used in agriculture, logistics, infrastructure inspections, environmental protection, emergency services and many other sectors. They bring innovation, new business opportunities and economic growth, but they can also be misused.

Recent events have shown that drones can threaten critical infrastructure, airports, energy networks, public spaces and even national security. With the rapid development of drone technologies, Europe must prepare to respond to these new circumstances.

‘The EU must strengthen its drone and counter-drone capabilities to protect critical infrastructure, citizens and public security,’ said Mr Hajnoš. ‘In addition to this, we need a strong European industrial base, skilled workers and clear rules to ensure that innovation, safety and strategic resilience go hand in hand.’



INDUSTRIAL ACCELERATOR ACT: EESC BACKS ‘MADE IN EUROPE’ BUT CALLS FOR STRICTER SAFEGUARDS AND MORE FOCUS ON WORKERS

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the European Commission’s proposed Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) as a timely move to strengthen Europe’s industrial competitiveness, at a time when manufacturing’s share of EU GDP has fallen from 17.4% in 2000 to just 14.3% today.

In [an opinion](#) on the IAA adopted at its July plenary session, the EESC said it supported the Commission’s ambition to increase manufacturing’s share of EU GDP to 20% by 2035, but stressed that the legislation must do more to protect European industry, ensure fair competition and create quality jobs.

‘Achieving this ambition will require more than just setting targets. We must create the conditions that allow companies to invest, innovate and grow in Europe,’ said **Antje Gerstein**, president of the EESC’s Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which drafted the opinion.

She added that the focus on simplifying and accelerating permitting procedures was a crucial step forward, but highlighted that speeding up permits would make little difference if other obstacles remained: ‘Companies also need reliable energy supplies, modern infrastructure and skilled workers, as well as better coordination between EU and national rules. Without these conditions, delays and higher costs will remain a reality.’

The EESC said acceleration areas must not widen regional inequalities.

It also threw its support behind the IAA’s ‘Made in Europe’ approach, but warned that non-EU countries should benefit only if they offer genuine reciprocity, meet equivalent EU standards and respect European value chains. (II)



ENERGY – EESC CALLS FOR A COMPREHENSIVE STORAGE STRATEGY

The European Commission should set up an energy storage strategy, as infrastructure for storing energy is key for a sovereign, affordable and resilient European Energy Union. This is the EESC’s call in the [opinion](#) drafted by Thomas Kattnig and Konstantinos Mousouroulis adopted at its July plenary session.

‘Energy storage facilities are critical infrastructure – just as important as electricity grids or power plants,’ said **Mr Kattnig**. ‘Europe undoubtedly needs a common storage strategy. Without storage, there can be no secure and successful energy transition. And without a storage strategy, there is no European energy

sovereignty. The market alone will not deliver the storage capacity Europe needs. Strategic public investment, long-term planning and targeted regulation are indispensable.’

The EU energy system is currently undergoing radical change due to geopolitical, economic, climate and social factors. In the past few years, Russia’s war against Ukraine has revealed the EU’s structural weaknesses. The main issues are fossil-fuel dependence, import reliance, inadequate and ageing grids and high price volatility. Energy policy has now become a matter of EU sovereignty, economic security, strategic autonomy and social stability.

‘In spite of the rapid progress of renewables and efficiency measures, the EU’s gross available energy remains dominated by oil and gas, with a very high rate of import dependency,’ explained **Mr Mousouroulis**. ‘Europe’s energy supply must become more independent and more resilient, and storage is central to this effort.’

Storage facilities are a key element of a renewable energy system, ensuring security of supply. Increasing the production of energy alone is not enough: storage is crucial to overcome the variability of many renewable sources, such as wind and solar power, thus maintaining a reliable supply. When renewable generation exceeds demand, surplus electricity can be stored instead of being wasted. The stored energy can then be used when the output from renewable generation falls.

Energy storage solutions are therefore needed to make Europe less dependent on fossil fuel imports and so stabilise energy prices. They strengthen the security of supply, making the energy transition feasible, affordable, socially fair and geographically balanced.

However, the EU lacks an overarching strategy for energy storage that integrates fundamental elements such as infrastructure, spatial planning, market design, industrial policy and security. Other important factors include social objectives, network rules, tariff impacts, critical raw material requirements, environmental footprint, affordability, training needs and democratic governance.



HOUSING - THE EU NEEDS A BOLDER STRATEGY FOR CONSTRUCTION

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is once again pressing the EU institutions to lose no time in addressing the structural housing crisis unfolding across Europe, and is calling on the European Commission to provide details about the planned initiatives and to adopt even more ambitious measures.

In the [opinion](#) adopted at the July plenary session and drawn up by **Thomas Kattnig**, the Committee welcomes the *Strategy for Housing Construction* included in the *Affordable Housing Plan*. However, it urges the Commission to take immediate action to:

- set the necessary framework conditions for construction to serve as a catalyst for affordable, sustainable and high-quality housing;
- include a right to adequate and affordable housing in EU primary law;
- identify sufficient funding;
- focus more on vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, older people, young people and families with children; and
- emphasise sustainability.

‘Europe needs a fresh start in housing construction and this must be affordable, innovative, sustainable and socially just,’ said **Mr Kattnig**. ‘Europe must finally take action. We need more housing and above all more affordable housing. Not luxury residential projects but homes that families, young people and workers can actually afford.’

Housing is not a luxury but a basic right. Yet, for an increasing number of people across Europe, this very fundamental right has become unaffordable. For years, too little affordable housing has been built, and the result is that there is a shortfall of around 650 000 homes every year. At the same time, rents have gone up by almost 30% since 2010 whereas property prices have risen by more than 60% since 2013.

In the EESC’s view, housing support must prioritise conversions, renovations or new builds on a case by case basis and promote climate-neutral and resource-efficient construction methods, collective housing and alternative approaches to mobility that improve people’s quality of life. (mp)



CONTROL ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH: EESC CALLS FOR A MORE BALANCED MIGRATION STRATEGY

Europe’s migration policy must be built on fundamental rights, integration and safe legal pathways, rather than focusing predominantly on border controls and returns, says the European

Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in an opinion adopted at its July plenary session.

The [opinion on the European Migration and Asylum Strategy](#) welcomes the European Commission’s attempt to establish a common framework for EU action over the next five years. However, it considers that the [European Migration and Asylum Strategy](#) places too much emphasis on containment, border management and returns, while giving insufficient attention to integration, inclusion, legal migration and the protection of fundamental rights.

‘We are concerned about whether the implementation of the strategy will fully comply with the EU’s core values, in particular respect for human rights, human dignity, solidarity and the rule of law. The credibility and legitimacy of the EU migration policy will depend on the extent to which these principles are effectively upheld in practice,’ rapporteur **José Antonio Moreno Díaz** stated.

The Committee acknowledges positive elements in the strategy, including references to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, support for temporary protection for displaced Ukrainians and recognition of the importance of integration. Nevertheless, it warns that returns should remain a measure of last resort within a broader, effective and humane migration policy, with greater emphasis placed on voluntary returns accompanied by meaningful reintegration support.

The EESC also calls for safe and accessible legal pathways that reflect the full spectrum of migration, including movement for work at all skill levels, family reunification and humanitarian protection. It warns that focusing primarily on highly skilled workers could increase irregular migration and create further opportunities for exploitation and trafficking. Legal pathways should therefore be accompanied by safeguards against labour exploitation, social dumping and undeclared work.

The EESC raises concerns about the use of 'safe country' concepts, return hubs outside the EU and the growing reliance on digital technologies and artificial intelligence in migration management. It warns that technological efficiency must never replace individual assessment, effective judicial protection or respect for fundamental rights, and calls for independent monitoring to ensure full compliance with the principle of non-refoulement.

The Committee argues that integration remains the missing element of the strategy. It calls for equal access to employment, education, healthcare and social services, supported by language learning and recognition of qualifications, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups. The EESC also stresses that cooperation with third countries should combine development support, legal migration opportunities and strong human rights safeguards, noting that the success of EU migration policy will ultimately depend on its ability to uphold Europe's core values.(Im)



FROM WORDS TO ACTION: EESC BACKS STRONGER ANTI-RACISM MEASURES

The fight against racism in Europe must move beyond good intentions and become a genuine political priority, the European Economic and Social Committee says in its recently adopted opinion on the EU Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030.

Adopted at the EESC plenary session on 15 July 2026, the [opinion](#) calls on the European institutions and the Member States to strengthen efforts against racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, anti-Roma hatred and structural discrimination. The Committee warns that racism threatens individual rights, social cohesion, democracy and peaceful coexistence in Europe.

As rapporteur **Pascal Debay** explains: 'The fight against racism within European society as a whole, and in the world of work, must truly become a priority. Equal rights are a prerequisite for living together; discrimination must cease!'

From commitments to enforcement

The EESC expresses deep concern at the [rise in racist acts and language](#) across Europe and the deteriorating situation of minorities and vulnerable groups. It also warns that political rhetoric is increasingly scapegoating migrants and minorities for economic and social difficulties.

While welcoming the [new EU strategy](#), the Committee argues that voluntary commitments are insufficient. It calls for common indicators, regular reporting, proper evaluation and conditional funding. The Member States should also adopt national anti-racism plans with clear timelines, monitoring tools and adequately resourced coordinators.

The EESC calls for stronger enforcement of EU anti-discrimination legislation, including effective penalties for racist acts and hate speech. It also stresses the importance of involving civil society organisations in the design and implementation of anti-racism policies and ensuring they receive long-term support and funding.

The Committee strongly advocates action against racism in education, healthcare, housing and employment. This includes promoting equal access to services, tackling discriminatory practices and strengthening the role of social dialogue and workplace measures in combating discrimination, unequal career progression and pay inequalities.

The opinion also highlights the need for closer scrutiny of digital platforms, algorithms and artificial intelligence where they may contribute to hatred or discrimination. To deliver tangible results, the EU Anti-Racism Strategy must be backed by sufficient resources, transparent funding and sustained political commitment.(lm)



GENDER EQUALITY CANNOT WAIT: EESC CALLS FOR STRONGER ACTION TO TURN COMMITMENTS INTO RESULTS

Gender equality is not only a fundamental EU value but also a driver of economic growth, competitiveness and democratic resilience, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) says in its opinion on the [Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030](#), adopted during its July plenary session.

The [opinion](#) welcomes the European Commission's renewed commitment to advancing equality at a time of growing opposition to equality policies and fundamental rights. However, the EESC warns that the strategy's success will depend on effective implementation, monitoring and measurable results across all Member States.

'Europe has already made strong commitments to gender equality. The challenge now is to turn those commitments into action. Gender equality is not only a fundamental value - it is one of Europe's greatest opportunities. It benefits everyone. When everyone has the opportunity to contribute according to their

talents and potential, Europe becomes more competitive, more resilient and more democratic,' says rapporteur **Juliane Marie Neiiendam**.

The EESC identifies uneven implementation as the main weakness of the [previous strategy](#). It calls for clearer benchmarks, stronger monitoring and closer links between equality objectives and EU instruments, including the European Semester, funding programmes and rule of law monitoring. Gender equality should remain a horizontal principle in EU funding, with proportionate reporting requirements that avoid unnecessary burdens, particularly for SMEs.

Women's economic independence is central to gender equality. Persistent gaps in employment, pay, career progression and pensions reflect structural inequalities, including the unequal distribution of care responsibilities. The Committee calls for stronger labour market participation, access to quality jobs and action against occupational segregation. It also urges full and effective implementation of the [Pay Transparency Directive](#).

Affordable, high-quality care services, a fairer sharing of responsibilities and better conditions in the care sector are equally important. The proposed [European Care Deal](#) should therefore be developed in consultation with civil society and the social partners. Social dialogue and collective bargaining can also help create inclusive workplaces and fair working conditions.

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence offer significant opportunities, but can also reinforce discrimination through algorithmic bias and online harms. The EESC therefore calls for gender-sensitive digital policies and stronger safeguards against bias, online violence, deepfakes and disinformation, alongside support for education systems to tackle discrimination and stereotypes. It also stresses the need for effective action against gender-based violence and greater participation of women in political, economic and public life, arguing that gender equality is essential to Europe's democracy, competitiveness and resilience.(Im)



CURATED CONVERSATIONS AT THE WTO: WHO GETS A SAY IN THE AGE OF MINI TRADE DEALS?

Trade policy is changing rapidly. To secure critical raw materials, protect supply chains, accelerate the digital transition and respond to geopolitical pressure, governments are increasingly striking flexible, sector-specific arrangements, often known as 'mini deals'.

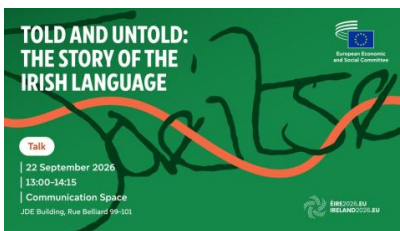
These mini deals promise speed and agility where traditional free trade agreements can take years and be politically divisive. But there is a catch: when established consultation and monitoring mechanisms are missing, who ensures that civil society has a meaningful voice?

The EESC considered this urgent question during the [WTO Public Forum](#) in Geneva at a side event held on 17 September.

The conversation explored what is driving the rise of this new type of deal, where they create risks and opportunities for stakeholders, and how transparency, accountability and organised civil society participation can be built into this new trade landscape.

As the EU body representing employers, workers and civil society organisations, the EESC was uniquely placed to lead the debate. Its hands-on experience of bringing diverse voices into EU trade policy includes serving as the secretariat for the [EU Domestic Advisory Groups](#).

The event brought together voices from organised civil society, business, trade unions, environmental and development organisations, EU institutions, partner countries, the Geneva trade community and international organisations for a conversation on how faster trade deals can remain open, accountable and inclusive (pm).



CULTURAL EVENTS: THE STORY OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE AND SRI LANKAN CULTURAL EVENING

The EESC is hosting a series of cultural activities to mark the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, starting with a talk on the story of the Irish language (22 September). On top of this, a Sri Lankan cultural evening will be held on 23 September.

Marking the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

On 1 July this year, Ireland assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the eighth time. It is the country's first presidency since the Irish language acquired full status as an official working language of the EU. This presidency is especially meaningful for the EESC: for the first time in its current form, an Irish national, **Séamus Boland**, is serving as Committee President. Together, these milestones offer a unique opportunity to highlight Ireland's history and culture.

To mark this occasion, the EESC will host a cultural programme at its premises, lasting from September until November. The agenda will kick off on 22 September with the talk *Told and Untold: the Story of the Irish Language* by Dr Diarmuid Johnson. Next on the agenda is a poster exhibition supported by the Embassy of Ireland in Belgium. The exhibition *Blazing a Trail: lives and legacies of Irish diaspora women* will be inaugurated on 21 October by EESC Vice-President for Communication **Marija Hanževački**. The programme will close with an interactive drawing workshop on Irish folklore with artist **Selkies** on 26 November.

Sri Lankan cultural evening

On 23 September 2026, the EESC, in cooperation with the Embassy of Sri Lanka to the European Union, will host a Sri Lankan Cultural Evening. The event will bring together EESC members, representatives of the European institutions and members of the diplomatic community in Brussels to discover the rich cultural heritage and traditions of Sri Lanka.

The initiative reflects the EESC's continuous commitment to promoting intercultural dialogue, international cooperation and strong relations between the EU and countries across Asia and the Indian Ocean region. It also builds on the success of the Indian Cultural Evening held at the EESC in February 2026.

The evening will pay tribute to Sri Lanka's long-standing cultural traditions, opening with the traditional Sri Lankan oil lamp ceremony, a symbol of wisdom, prosperity and new beginnings. Welcome addresses will be delivered by **Ms Hanževački** and **HE Mr Chandana Weerasena**, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the European Union, Belgium and Luxembourg.

A vibrant cultural programme presented by the Tisaravi Dance Foundation will follow, showcasing a variety of classical and traditional Sri Lankan dances.

The event forms part of the EESC's ongoing cultural programme and its efforts to showcase the cultural diversity of its international partners.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



TURNING COMPETITIVENESS INTO RESULTS: THE CHALLENGE AFTER THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

President von der Leyen's 2026 State of the Union speech sent a positive signal to Europe's business community. Many of the priorities highlighted by the Commission reflect what employers have been calling for over many years: a stronger single market, simpler rules, competitive energy prices, faster permitting and investment procedures, and better access to capital.

By Sandra Parthie, President of the EESC Employers' Group

Yet the challenge is no longer identifying what needs to be done. The challenge is delivering. Europe's businesses do not need an ever-growing list of strategies and initiatives. They need tangible results that make it easier to invest, innovate, grow and compete from Europe.

The proposed pact against gold-plating is particularly welcome: reducing administrative burdens at EU level is important, but simplification will only succeed if the Member States do not add new layers of requirements

when implementing European legislation. The proposal for a European Corporation on Critical Raw Materials also appears promising, although its value will depend on the results it delivers in practice.

On international cooperation, we wholeheartedly support closer cooperation with Canada, which could serve as a model for the reliable partnerships European business needs with other like-minded economies, and we stand ready to support the efforts in this field.

The State of the Union address sets the right tone. Now it must be matched by implementation. Before launching new frameworks, the focus should be on delivering existing commitments, including the Single Market Roadmap, the omnibus simplification packages and the Savings and Investments Union. Every new initiative should also be subject to a rigorous competitiveness check.

Ultimately, the success of Europe's competitiveness agenda will be measured by a simple question: is Europe becoming a better place to invest, innovate, grow and create jobs? European employers stand ready to contribute, but they must remain part of the conversation. What matters now is turning ambition into action and ensuring businesses see a real difference on the ground.



AIMING FOR BETTER WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS FOR ALL EUROPEAN WORKERS

In times of crisis, we do not back down, we do not blame the least fortunate or the most vulnerable, we do not abandon our fight for workers' rights, the environment or our defence of

human rights. We take a stand for the kind of society we want. Our priorities for this new term are based on forging an equal, strong and independent Europe, where both the burdens and the benefits are shared fairly, using social dialogue to set the solid foundations of a democratic and free society.

By the EESC Workers' Group

The Workers' Group has been an architect of change, ensuring that all trade unions are committed to building a strong, democratic, social, and inclusive Europe. Our priorities for the 2025-2030 mandate aim to respond to the current exceptionally challenging environment with proposals on legislative and non-legislative initiatives.

These initiatives are grouped around our main principles.

For a stronger and social Europe: We will continue to promote the improvement of services of general interest, quality jobs, adequate pensions and stronger social protection. We will continue fighting all forms of poverty, supporting equal rights and combating the gender pay gap.

Collective bargaining and workers' rights remain fundamental to our vision for a fairer and competitive European economy.

For a stronger democratic Europe: We will continue to defend democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. We will support organised civil society in the fight against its shrinking space, discrimination and misinformation.

For a sustainable and competitive European economy: Industrial change must strengthen Europe's economic resilience and strategic autonomy. We support a 'Made in Europe' approach in strategic sectors and include social conditionality in EU industrial funding.

We call for a strong Just Transition Directive and a green and digital transition grounded in quality jobs, gender equality and robust standards.

And finally, an ambitious EU budget and cohesion policy together with decisive action against tax dumping, tax avoidance and tax havens remain high on our agenda.

Our group's strategic priorities will be our tool to define our political demands and shape public debate in the run-up to the European elections in 2029.

Find out more about our priorities for social progress [here](#).



CIVIL SOCIETY CALLS FOR AN AMBITIOUS SUSTAINABLE EU AGENDA

President von der Leyen emphasised in today's [State of the Union address](#) the importance of Europe's competitiveness and independence, as well as its security, climate goals and fundamental values. These priorities are crucial for a resilient and prosperous future and address some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

By Cillian Lohan, President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group

Given both the magnitude and the number of challenges we are facing, we are calling for an ambitious EU agenda. Not only is this the only way forward but we would also emphasise that the agenda can only be delivered with strong civil society organisations and empowered communities as partners. The [Civil Society Organisations' Group](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) stands ready to support such an agenda, drawing on the expertise and knowledge from the ground of its 109 representatives from the 27 EU Member States. We will continue to challenge the EU institutions to reflect the needs and aspirations of civil society.

We particularly welcome President von der Leyen's commitment to defending fundamental rights and advancing the green transition. Engaged citizens and civil society organisations will play a key role in delivering these initiatives. From issues concerning our supply of critical raw materials and defence to insurance: involving civil society organisations can help the EU develop solutions that are truly inclusive and genuinely address the needs of communities all over the EU.

While we welcome President von der Leyen's intention to maintain the EU's climate targets, we call for a stronger focus on addressing the causes of climate change – rather than merely on the market opportunities arising from the necessary adaptation actions.

We propose working towards a dedicated European agenda that fully integrates the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Reaffirming the [Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) is essential both at European and international level. With this in mind, the implementation of the [European Green Deal](#) must continue at a sustainable pace that brings everyone along.

We are calling for a renewed commitment to civil society as a fundamental cornerstone of European democracy. Europe's democratic infrastructure – of which the EESC is a vital part – must not only be protected but also strengthened. Active citizens, strong civil society organisations and resilient communities are indispensable for upholding our democratic values, fostering societal cohesion, and delivering sustainable prosperity. This is crucial for the future of the European Union.

Our Union will be stronger and more united when civil society is empowered. As the Civil Society Organisations' Group in the EESC, we are ready to facilitate this. This is how we can further strengthen a Europe that is more democratic, sustainable and closer to its citizens and communities.

IN FOCUS: CONNECTING EU SEMINAR



IN DEFENCE OF EUROPEAN VALUES: THE POWER OF CIVIL SOCIETY

EESC Vice-President for Communication Marija Hanževački hosted the 18th edition of the Connecting EU seminar, the EESC's flagship communication event, co-organised with the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria and held in Sofia in July. She opens our coverage of the seminar by reflecting on its main discussions and conclusions.

On 6 and 7 July, we brought the Connecting EU seminar to the Bulgarian capital for two days of discussion on some of the most pressing matters facing Europe. Co-organised by the EESC and the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria and hosted by Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, the seminar brought together EESC members and civil society communicators – communication and press officers from employers' associations, trade unions and civil society organisations, as well as journalists, researchers and representatives of EU and national institutions.

In the Focus section of this September issue of EESC Info, we bring you the highlights of this year's Connecting EU seminar – whether you missed the event or simply want a recap.

This year's theme, *In defence of European values: The power of civil society*, reflects the challenging times Europe is facing. The assumptions that have shaped our continent for decades are increasingly being called into question, both within and beyond our borders.

Europe faces growing security challenges and geopolitical tensions, mounting pressure to enhance its competitiveness, and increasingly serious threats to democracy.

Our first discussion focused on Europe's new economic compass. We asked how Europe could align its efforts to strengthen the competitiveness of its economy with its hallmark social model and the environmental ambitions that have long set it apart. The presidents and representatives of the EESC's three Groups – **Sandra Parthie, Florian Marin and Cillian Lohan** – opened the debate by discussing what a competitive, social and sustainable Europe should look like. The panel that followed brought together different views on regulation, workers' living standards, environmental safeguards and the conditions Europe needs to build a stronger economy.

These questions cannot be separated from Europe's place in the world. In his keynote address, journalist and author **Dave Keating** examined Europe's dependence on the United States and argued that it must become more capable of shaping its own future. At a time when long-standing alliances are changing and economic and security dependencies are becoming increasingly risky, Europe needs to decide what greater sovereignty should mean in practice.

Our second major discussion turned to democracy. Foreign interference, disinformation, populism and the growing influence of online platforms are shaping what Europeans see and believe, and ultimately how they vote. The presentation of the report on *TikTokcracy in the Balkans* by the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) showed how algorithmic manipulation and coordinated networks of fake accounts can influence elections and exploit weaknesses in platform oversight.

We discussed whether fact-checking, media regulation and initiatives such as the European Democracy Shield are sufficient to counter these threats. But defending democracy is not only about fighting false information. It also means rebuilding trust, strengthening independent media and civil society, and communicating more convincingly how European democracy improves people's lives.

There are good reasons not to give in to pessimism. More than half of Europeans continue to trust the EU, 57% are satisfied with the way democracy works at EU level and 73% see the Union as a place of stability in a troubled world. Democracy remains worth defending – and Europeans still believe in it.

On the second day, we turned from debate to practical tools. Our sessions on AI explored how artificial intelligence is transforming the way information is produced, shared and verified. Participants examined both its potential and its risks, from fact-checking and digital verification to the use of AI agents in everyday communication work. We concluded with a hands-on LinkedIn workshop on creating memorable content, building meaningful professional connections and using AI without losing one's own voice.

We did not expect to solve all of Europe's problems in two days. But I hope we left Sofia with a better understanding of the challenges ahead, new ideas and more effective ways of communicating about Europe. Civil society has an essential role to play – not only in defending European values, but also in ensuring that citizens can recognise their value in their everyday lives.

You can learn more about the Connecting EU 2026 on the [event website](#) where you can watch the [recording](#) of all the panels and sessions. They are also available on the [EESC YouTube channel](#).



CAN DISINFORMATION THREATEN DEMOCRACY?

The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria was a co-host and co-organiser of the EESC's Connecting EU seminar, held in Sofia this July. One of the topics in the spotlight was the threat that disinformation poses to democracy. In her article for EESC Info, Zornitsa Rousinova, President of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council, and EESC member, draws on Bulgaria's euro-area debate to explain how organised civil society, reliable information and media literacy can help counter manipulation and protect public trust.

It was a great honour for the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria to co-host this year's edition of Connecting EU 2026 together with the European Economic and Social Committee. Hosting the event in Sofia was a recognition of the active role of organised civil society and of the importance of cooperation between European and national institutions in safeguarding our shared democratic values.

For my generation, democracy and peace seemed unshakeable in Europe. Yet today, we see wars around us and hear voices challenging democratic values. As representatives of organised civil society, our role is therefore to support and advocate for government economic and social policies that uphold those values.

Today, disinformation is among the most serious challenges facing European societies. It is no longer an abstract concept, but a phenomenon that we increasingly encounter across Europe. It has a growing impact on public opinion and on citizens' perceptions of key issues, deepens social divisions and undermines trust in institutions. In today's digital environment, false or misleading information often spreads faster than verified facts, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish truth from manipulation. This is why we need reliable sources of information and institutions that consistently uphold facts, evidence and truth.

Organised civil society plays a vital role in this process. The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria demonstrates how dialogue between employers, trade unions and civil society organisations can lead to balanced positions based on expertise, scientific evidence and European experience. Such cooperation is not only a contribution to public debate; it is an investment in public trust. Trust remains our strongest defence against disinformation.

This approach was particularly important during the public debate on Bulgaria's accession to the euro area. At a time when the discussion was accompanied by misconceptions, speculation and conflicting claims, the Council provided citizens with reliable, evidence-based information. Our aim was not to engage in political controversy, but to help people make informed decisions based on facts rather than fear or misinformation.

At the same time, education and critical thinking are essential tools in building resilient societies. Citizens who can evaluate information, identify trustworthy sources and recognise manipulation are better prepared to resist disinformation. Media literacy is no longer an optional skill; it is a fundamental requirement for modern democracies.

People in Bulgaria and across Europe are primarily concerned about issues that directly affect their lives: rising living costs, climate change, security and the consequences of war. They expect practical solutions and clear answers. Therefore, institutions, media, experts and civil society organisations must work together to ensure that reliable information reaches citizens in an accessible, timely and evidence-based way.

I firmly believe that dialogue, transparency and trust across society are the foundations of an effective response to disinformation. Through cooperation based on expertise, facts and shared responsibility, we can protect European values, strengthen public confidence and ensure that Europe remains close to its citizens. Reliable information is not simply a means of communication — it is a cornerstone of democracy and a prerequisite for informed decisions in the public interest.

Zornitsa Rousinova is President of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria. Between 2012 and 2020, she served in three governments as Deputy Minister for Labour and Social Policy, and from 2016 to 2017 as Minister for Labour and Social Policy. She was responsible for labour market policies, social inclusion, labour law, European affairs and international cooperation, and for managing European funds. She has been a member of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group since September 2025.



EUROPE PUT ALL ITS EGGS IN THE AMERICAN BASKET - TODAY, THAT BASKET IS COLLAPSING

Why do Europeans tolerate their politicians repeatedly bowing to Donald Trump when similar deference to a leader of another foreign power would provoke outrage? In his keynote address at Connecting EU 2026, Brussels-based journalist Dave Keating, author of *The Owned Continent*, traced Europe's submission to the USA back to decades of American cultural dominance, which have made it psychologically difficult for Europeans to see the USA as anything but a friend. We bring you highlights from his speech in Sofia.

For 80 years, European citizens have been sold an illusion of independence. In exchange for Marshall Plan rebuilding and NATO protection following World War II, Western Europe surrendered a large amount of its sovereignty to the United States. Given the state of destruction that European powers had brought upon themselves in that war, perhaps this Faustian bargain was inevitable. But what is perplexing is why Europe's leaders, even after rebuilding with the economic miracles of the 1960s, have chosen to maintain that same protectorate structure, which in many ways resembles that of vassal states, still today, 80 years later.

During the Cold War, in places like here in Bulgaria, Russia's control was brutal and obvious. West of the Iron Curtain, America's control was more subtle – and it was a free choice. As the academic Glyn Morgan argues in his new book *The Rise and Fall of American Europe*, which traces how post-war Western Europe was created by and for the United States, he speaks of the Goldilocks treatment: the USA allowed just enough independence to avoid breeding resentment, but not so much that it would threaten American control.

After 1989, Eastern Europe decided to embrace that Western model of American control, for obvious reasons vastly preferring it to the brutality of Soviet control. But this arrangement was always tenuous and risky. Europe put all its eggs in the American basket. And today, that basket is collapsing.

Donald Trump has exposed not only the degree of America's power over Europe, but also just how easily the USA can extort Europeans by using those dependencies against them. As a journalist based in Brussels, I

spent 2025 watching the repeated surrender of Europe's leaders to Donald Trump in astonishment. Why, I asked, wasn't the EU willing to use the myriad tools at its disposal to fight back against this extortion? There are a variety of factors, but to me, one is very clear. Decades of American cultural dominance on this continent have made Europeans unable to see Americans as an adversary, a threat or a possible enemy.

How else can you explain why European citizens have accepted their leaders' repeated surrender to Donald Trump over the past year? The humiliating concessions of President von der Leyen's Turnberry deal, signed on Donald Trump's golf course in Scotland. The over-the-top Trump flattery, calling him 'Daddy'. The unquestioning acceptance of setting an arbitrary 5% target of military spending at NATO – a level even the United States doesn't reach. We know that such grovelling to a Russian or Chinese leader would never be accepted by citizens. So why does it somehow seem normal in the American context?

From the time they're born, Europeans are inundated with American culture. Turn on the radio and you're almost certain to find an American song. Turn on the TV and you'll find an American programme. It has been like this for decades and there's no way that hasn't had a psychological impact on Europeans. I believe that it has made a vast swathe of the European public subconsciously think they are in America, or at least in the outer edges of an American empire. And that has made it psychologically difficult to accept that the USA could now be an adversary or even an enemy that means Europe harm.

What are the essential steps to liberate Europe from American dependence and achieve European sovereignty?

We have to take the problem of American cultural domination seriously... The irony is we now do have a common European culture: American culture. An Italian and a German don't know anything about each others' pop stars or TV shows or news, but when they come together they can talk about American culture. They talk about Superman, Beyonce, Stranger Things.

We must fix this continent's broken education systems. The reason Europeans don't know about EU politics is that their education systems never taught them even the basics of EU civics and how the EU actually works.

Europe can only achieve sovereignty through EU federation. There is no other path. And for those who recoil at the F word, I would ask them to explain how else Europeans can be sovereign and free from the domination of global superpowers... Yes, there are differences between the different parts of Europe. But zoom out, to a global level, and you'll see that Europeans have far more in common with one another than they think. There is a European culture; there is a European life. It is different from other parts of the world. And it is different from America...

The term United States of Europe is probably leading people to the wrong comparison. A better comparison is India, which is a union of different states which historically were all separate. Different languages, different cultures, different races. They were brought together by British imperialism and when they kicked the British out of the subcontinent they could have chosen to go back to being a bunch of European-sized small princely states. Instead, they chose to build an independent sovereign union.

Europe's economic muscle: Europe has all the tools it would need to be able to say no to Donald Trump's extortion but it chooses not to use them. Why haven't governments and banks signed up to the European

Payments Initiative, which would prevent Donald Trump from turning off Europeans' ability to pay each other with Visa Mastercard overnight? Why is Germany blocking the use of the Anti-Coercion Instrument against the USA? Why is France blocking the diversification of the EU's trade partners? Why is Italy blocking discussions on using the EU's tariff bazooka against US services imports? Because Europeans haven't had the courage and confidence to use the strengths that they possess.

EU army: A pooled European military would be as large as America's and ten times the size of Russia's. But efforts to create this have been blocked by this continent's Atlanticist leadership for fear of undermining NATO, which at this point is indeed a paper tiger, as Donald Trump himself has said. He is after all the one who decides whether it is or not. And it is clear there is no longer US Article 5 protection of Europe.

Finally, Europeans must believe in themselves. We need to foster a European pride, mindful of the horrific mistakes of the past but moving on, learning from that and creating a European civic nationalism. We can't keep ceding the emotion of pride and patriotism to the far right. We need to offer Europeans a continental patriotism. We need to define what being European is, in contrast to Europe's enemies. We need to explain why Europe is not America and why that is a good thing that Europeans should be proud of.

You can watch the whole speech [here](#).

Dave Keating is an American-European journalist based in Brussels who has covered EU politics for 20 years. He is the Brussels correspondent for the international cable news station France 24, the author of *Gulf Stream Blues on Substack* and the author of the book [The Owned Continent](#) about Europe's dependence on the United States. Previously, he was a Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and editor of *EuropeanVoice.com*, a side publication of *The Economist*. In 2023, he was ranked the top EU social media influencer.



MADE IN THE EU – COMPETITIVE, SOCIAL, SUSTAINABLE

Sandra Parthie and Cillian Lohan, presidents of the EESC Employers' and Civil Society Organisations' Groups respectively, and Florian Marin, representing the Workers' Group, sat down at

the Connecting EU 2026 roundtable, *Made in the EU: competitive, social and sustainable*, to discuss some of the EU's most pressing priorities. Here are some of the thoughts they shared.

The EU now has an agenda for competitiveness, but before that it had the European Green Deal and Social Europe, pushing for sustainability and better social conditions. How, in your opinion, can we balance the three?

Sandra Parthie, president of the EESC Employers' Group

Boosting competitiveness, driving the green transition and ensuring strong social standards all depend on investment. However, generating the required capital presents a conundrum that is difficult to resolve. Every euro can only be spent once: should it go to more efficient production, new product development, or workplace safety? This is always a decision that a company or business owner has to make, while also taking into consideration all the compliance costs arising from Europe's regulatory framework. The problem is that, compared with other regions of the world, operating in Europe has become significantly harder. Unfortunately, businesses and companies are relocating outside the EU, where generating value and maintaining a sustainable operation is easier. The problem is that we have yet to solve this core challenge. How do we get companies to stay in Europe, and ensure that they can invest here and remain profitable? Without profit, there is nothing left to redistribute towards green initiatives, but also to better wages and working conditions. Without making a profit first, there is nothing to redistribute!

To fix this, the EU's first priority should be to invest in core infrastructure. The limited EU budget available for this should be put into modernising and improving European infrastructure – telecommunications, energy and transport networks. This is the backbone of economic growth. If AI is also to take off in Europe, it needs robust telecommunications networks. Cost-efficient production requires lower energy prices through modernised grids capable of handling renewable energy. Without a solid infrastructure base, energy systems will fail, transport will stall and connectivity will drop. All of this requires public investment in infrastructure. We need to establish the basis from which everything else can develop. Otherwise, we are just going to end up in a situation where the electricity does not work, the trains do not run and, in the end, we cannot talk to each other. That is not what we want.

How can we redefine the concept of competitiveness to ensure that it serves society and the environment, rather than becoming the ultimate goal?

Florian Marin, Workers' Group

Competitiveness cannot mean inequality, precarious jobs or social dumping. All these harm competitiveness, too. We need four concrete things. First, stop using competitiveness to lower wages. This is a trap that will ultimately hurt democracy, the European Project and competitiveness itself. If you shrink purchasing power, this will impact demand and therefore our economies as a whole. For a long time we have outsourced our growth to other countries, such as the US or China. Trying to compete with China on low wages is a race you cannot win. To be viable, competitiveness must also mean having skills, investing in innovation and creating the conditions for businesses to thrive. This is the path towards competitiveness: not lowering wages but creating a better business environment that can exist sustainably, and that can provide predictable good working conditions and a good quality of life.

Second, we need to see public investment as a driver of growth for the EU. To achieve this, we need to rethink the role of public institutions in investment and involve civil society more closely. Third, I think we need conditionality directing public investment towards the common good, so that the market works for the benefit of society and not the other way round. Fourth, I think it is fundamental to have working social dialogue and collective bargaining. I know that this is a trade union perspective, but once again, we have laws that must be respected. We have the European Minimum Wage Directive – I am thinking for instance of the 80% threshold for collective bargaining coverage. The right measures help companies train, hire and retain talent, which also allows firms to innovate and improve quality and save costs. Of course, we also

need the capital market union to ease investment and funding of businesses.

These four things are crucial. We need to integrate them into the future concept of competitiveness. We must work based on collective bargaining, social and fundamental rights, and living, decent wages. This is how we ensure the EU project and democracy survive, how we stop far-right populism, and how we achieve competitiveness in a sustainable manner.

How do we achieve a sustainable economy when resources are scarce and other countries and global powers may be taking a different approach?

Cillian Lohan, president of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

We already have an overarching framework that we have signed up to and agreed on: the United Nations [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) with its Sustainable Development Goals. The 17 goals that we set out to achieve include economic growth, infrastructure investment and the social dimension. Importantly, they also include the environmental dimension.

I do not believe that our starting point for building a sustainable economy should be the need for a strong economy – merely to have enough money to finance everything society needs and to protect the environment. Instead, I think we should start from the other side and look at what our needs are as a society. We should look at the need to respect the natural world – from which we obtain all our raw materials – and make this the starting point for designing things, given there are natural limits. We talk about working within planetary boundaries. We see the consequences of starting with the economy: environmental degradation to the point of what we call a triple planetary crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change. It is extraordinary that we simply accept that this is the world we live in. We have destroyed habitats and altered our climate to the point where parts of the Earth could potentially become uninhabitable. If we continue on this trajectory, we are going to have a huge migration problem from populated areas that will no longer be habitable.

I think what we actually need is a shift in how we approach the problem in the first place. We must find a way to deliver on those goals from that different perspective.

I have never subscribed to the idea that the best reason for doing something is that everybody else is doing it. In fact, I think it is better to do things a little differently from everybody else. Sometimes that can be very successful and sometimes disastrous. But in this case, I think we already have a very strong basis for sustainability. When you travel around the world, you see that the rest of the world looks to the EU as a leader in sustainability. I think that really sets us apart. We have this paranoia that the world sees us as great regulators and rule-makers. We have bought into that narrative, and now I feel that we are obsessed with deregulating and getting rid of rules because we want to show other people: 'Oh no, that is not what we are about. Look at us, we are free and carefree'. But rules and regulations are not necessarily bad if they deliver the right outcomes. Some of our rules and regulations are not delivering the right outcomes, and they need to be adapted and changed. But we are already leaders in the field of sustainability, and I think we should embrace that.



BALANCING COMPETITIVENESS, SOCIAL RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Connecting EU 2026 included a panel on *Europe's new economic compass: Balancing competitiveness, social rights and sustainability*. Our panellists Connor Allen, Slavina Spasova, Anne Friel and Dr Philipp Lausberg discussed how the EU can better align its economic and social objectives in a global context that is evolving at an unprecedented pace. Here are the highlights from the panel that was moderated by Deutsche Welle journalist and anchor Javier Arguedas.

Competitiveness has become one of the defining themes of the EU's current policy agenda. From your perspective, what do the data tell us about the state of European industry today, and why do you think competitiveness has become such a priority?

Connor Allen, corporate lobbyist: You cannot build a house without a foundation, and you cannot build social protections without prosperity. Without a competitive Europe, there is no social Europe. It does not exist.

We are in a crisis and we need to be raising the alarm.

The share of the world market that Europe occupies has fallen from 25% in 1992 to 13% today. We are a smaller and less important market, relatively. The average European has gone from having 80% of the purchasing-power-adjusted output of the average American in 1992 to about 68% today. So we're also a poorer market, relatively. And Europe is constantly outpaced by its competitors in the United States and China across every metric that deals with innovation. We have 110 unicorns compared to the USA's 680. Our R&D spending is a fraction of Chinese and US spending. One million jobs disappeared between 2019 and 2023. And the European Commission itself says that 27 000 jobs per month are now being lost. Many factories are closing, while those that remain open are not working at full capacity across every sector. Take the automotive sector: this accounts for 10% of Europe's economic output and the average factory is operating at 33% capacity. You've asked me what the data tell us about the state of European industry. It's very clear that those numbers, quite frankly, are apocalyptic. And that is why competitiveness has risen so high on the agenda. That's why it is receiving all the political attention.

What, in your view, are the main obstacles preventing European industry from competing on the same level as its global competitors? And what kinds of policy changes would you advocate for?

Connor Allen, corporate lobbyist: The lowest-hanging fruit is deregulation, deregulation, deregulation. But there is not just one obstacle. There are the three main evils that are affecting our industry: over-regulation, over-taxation and high energy costs. And one that started to emerge as a fourth evil in the last year or so is geopolitical risk, which we are all very aware of. Ultimately, we have historically high energy costs, labour costs and taxes. That's not a great combination.

By deregulation, I don't mean a race to the bottom. I mean fewer duplicative reporting obligations, fewer overlapping audits, fewer rules that measure process rather than output and fewer situations where

compliance becomes an industry in itself. Each company in Europe has to comply with hundreds of pieces of legislation at the EU level alone, not to mention the regulation at national level. Most of that regulation has been passed in the last 10 years and that is why the Japanese call it a regulatory tsunami.

For example, the combined cost of complying with the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, the Working Time Directive and the Pay Transparency Directive totals around EUR 1.5 million in upfront costs, with annual costs of a further EUR 1 million. How many workers can you employ? How many machines can you buy? How much innovation can you fund with that money? Quite a lot, actually. It is not sustainable by any metric.

State of Play 2025, a report published by the European Trade Union Institute, argues that competitiveness has become too narrow a lens for thinking about economic success. If that is the case, what indicators should policymakers be looking at instead?

Slavina Spasova, ULB, Core Team Member of the European Social Policy Analysis Network

(ESPAN): The macroeconomy and people's lived experiences sometimes move in opposite directions. Macroeconomic indicators are improving: employment is up and GDP is recovering, but real wages in several Member States remain below pre-pandemic levels, child poverty is even rising in some countries and housing is increasingly out of reach, especially for younger generations.

There are four indicators we should be looking at.

The first is job quality. We need to look not only at employment rates, as high employment figures can mask very precarious situations, such as precarious contracts, unpredictable working hours, psychosocial risks or young people not in education, employment or training. And we also need to look even more at indicators such as real wage growth, in-work poverty and the gender pay gap, as well as at the gender pension gap and bargaining coverage.

The second very important area is social investment across the life course. What is really reassuring is that this paradigm remains central to the EU. It is visible in the Union of Skills, in the anti-poverty strategy, the housing plan and, more generally, through the life-course approach of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is also visible now in EU governance, especially through the newly established social convergence procedure. However, once again, there is a risk that the social investment approach has been narrowed down solely to skills and labour supply.

Third, we should be looking into the three main transitions happening now at the EU level – the green, digital and demographic transitions – in an integrated way. And fourth, let us not forget gender policy, as all these transitions have been largely gender-blind.

It is very important to have the overall narrative right, meaning that the European Pillar of Social Rights should remain the main narrative. Let us see what happens with its revised action plan.

What concerns you most about the EU simplification agenda?

Slavina Spasova, ULB, Core Team Member of the European Social Policy Analysis Network

(ESPAN): Nobody, including the trade unions, is arguing against clearer, simpler and more workable rules. Simplification is legitimate and can even support social and environmental goals. But when simplifying, it is

very important to first conduct proper impact assessments and then involve all stakeholders, including trade unions and civil society.

ClientEarth has been highly critical of the Commission's recent simplification agenda. What are your organisation's main concerns?

Anne Friel, Head of Environmental Rights & Rule of Law at ClientEarth: We have two concerns: how these changes are being made, but also what the changes mean in practice and what is at stake.

Over the last two years, we have seen about 10 omnibus legislative proposals being fast-tracked under the banner of simplification, competitiveness and urgency. And the Commission has completely departed from its own better regulation rules, which require robust impact assessments and public consultation. And these are not just nice-to-haves: they really guarantee that EU legislation is based on solid evidence of the long-term impacts on people, businesses, human rights and climate goals, and that they are informed by the lived experience and the opinions of Europeans. But not one of the last 10 omnibus proposals has followed these rules.

Climate consistency checks and impact assessments were omitted, public consultations bypassed and a lot of the key decisions made by the Commission in putting together these legislative proposals were really influenced by certain business interests and excluded civil society voices.

The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was gutted through the first omnibus proposal. The CSDDD was a landmark Green Deal law. It required large companies to identify, prevent and address human rights abuses and environmental harms throughout their value chains. It also required companies to adopt and implement climate transition plans.

The first omnibus radically reduced the pool of companies that this applies to and it completely eliminated climate transition plans. And the justification for that in the Commission's proposal was that this was administration and red tape. This is a core obligation and a core component of the Green Deal. What does this mean for Europe? If companies are no longer required to account for the environmental and human rights harms linked to their supply chains, then the risks are actually borne by others: by workers who are facing exploitation, by the communities who are affected by pollution and deforestation and then, ultimately, by all of us and our children and our children's children, who are all facing the impacts of climate change. If we really need to change legislation, let us do it in the European way, based on democracy and supported by robust evidence and inclusive participation.

What would you propose in order to make European companies more competitive in the global economy without compromising the environmental protections that the EU has put in place?

Anne Friel, Head of Environmental Rights & Rule of Law at ClientEarth: Slashing environmental and social safeguards is not the answer. Democracy, transparency and evidence-based policymaking are not barriers to competitiveness. They are what make European regulation credible and durable. We should really be thinking about energy resilience, food resilience and how we can sustain our way of producing into the future. And this definitely cannot be done without regulation.

A healthy environment and a safe climate are the bedrock for business and for doing business well in the future. While the costs of keeping global warming below two degrees and avoiding ecosystem collapse seem extremely high now, if we don't do so, the costs of inaction will be much, much greater.

How do you assess the state of Europe's economy and its prospects in this very competitive environment?

Dr Philipp Lausberg, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre: Europe remains the world's second-largest economic bloc. It is the largest trading power. It has a highly skilled workforce, strong manufacturing capabilities, excellent research, and global leadership in many green and industrial technologies. It has a strong rule of law, predictability and a strong social model. And these are assets in an increasingly unstable, unpredictable world. But the world has changed fundamentally. And Europe's growth model rests basically on assumptions that no longer hold, such as cheap energy from Russia, open export markets based on free global trade and a rules-based international order guaranteed by a US security umbrella. All of that is basically gone. We are now facing geopolitical fragmentation and wars and the weaponisation of economic relations.

If it does not adapt its economic model to these new realities, Europe really risks a slow agony. It can only do that if it can leverage its size. This means it needs to integrate its single market better, it needs to invest more and it needs to build strong infrastructure while also investing in skills and reducing energy prices.

One of the reasons why the USA is ahead in productivity, which is the main measurement that Draghi uses to explain the difference in competitiveness, is that the USA has large tech companies. And that is something they have because of their size and their large market but also because of their large investment power. We also see our single market as a great asset, but it is too fragmented. Strategic sectors, energy, digital, defence, services, capital markets, professions: none of them are completely integrated. We are facing single market barriers that the IMF estimated at 44% between EU countries for goods and more than 100% for services. That makes it harder for businesses to scale across the EU, which would enable them to compete with the USA and China. And the single market could also increase demand in the EU and make us less dependent on export markets like China.

In addition, we need to make large-scale public investment in industrial policy that is coordinated, long-term and well targeted, as China does, for example, and increasingly the United States. Finally, we need to have a stronger trade defence.

Is simplification the right diagnosis and also the right remedy?

Dr Philipp Lausberg, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre: Simplification is only part of the answer. It is an important obstacle to competitiveness. The European Commission has said that the costs of complying with administrative and regulatory requirements amount to over EUR 100 billion annually. That is equivalent to around 0.9% of European GDP. That is significant but it is not going to do the trick alone. There is a Bloomberg study that said that Germany's current economic problems are attributable to Chinese overcapacity (40%), energy prices (40%) and the regulatory burden (only 20%). So, while it is important, we shouldn't overstate its importance compared to the other factors that I mentioned.

What is even more important is more investment in innovation, in key technologies, in industry and in infrastructure. This should be combined with public procurement, alongside made-in-Europe provisions and a robust trade policy.

You can watch the short interviews and the recording of the full panel on our [web page](#). More information about the panellists can be found [here](#).



WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT HOW TO MAKE DEMOCRACY COOL

The Connecting EU panel ‘Europe’s democratic compass: Can trust and resilience be restored?’ explored declining trust in European democracy. What could bring Europeans closer

together and convince them that the European democratic model, while not perfect, still delivers? What can European institutions, governments and civil society do to make democracy more resilient? Here are the views of our panellists, drawn from their short interviews with our media partner *New Eastern Europe* and from the panel discussion.

Zsófia Fülöp, journalist and fact-checker at Lakmusz.hu

As a journalist and fact-checker, I think we have to talk to people. We have to encourage conversation and critical thinking because, when we have a conversation, it is often about really abstract ideas and not about real-life challenges, problems or even successes. What we need to do is empower people and teach them how to consume media, how to question, how to be skeptical and how to be more critical if they encounter something in the news or on social media. We have to organise a lot of talks and interactive sessions, and really focus on the most targeted and vulnerable groups. This means not just people in big cities, but also those in rural areas. We need to talk to senior citizens and to those who are not privileged enough.

Alexandra Karppi, journalist and researcher at King’s College London, co-host of the Talk Eastern Europe podcast

In 2026, we have to be open to unlikely partnerships and unlikely heroes. The digital revolution is underway. We are going to have to look at how we communicate about democracy, but we will also have to go local and go back to our roots to make sure that democracy delivers.

Unfortunately, I think that, whether we like it or not — and I mean the royal ‘we’: all of us, civil society and independent media — are also going to have to become experts in marketing, PR and content creation. I

think this is the fortunate or unfortunate reality of where things are heading. As much as we can talk about how sophisticated the tools of manipulation are now, I think we must be honest that, from a regulatory standpoint, we are still behind. We can speak more about this.

From the perspective of somebody in civil society or independent media, we also need to adapt to this new reality. We need to think about how we make democracy cool. This might sound very silly, and maybe a bit plastic, but what works are cool memes and cool AI-generated videos. Whether they are true or not is completely irrelevant. Maybe this is a problem for public discourse. Maybe it is a problem for democracy in the long run. But, in the short run, we will continue to lose out if we do not adapt in this way.

This is going to depend so much on the context and on which local messages will resonate. It matters very much who is at the table to build those narratives. We all talk a lot in our bubbles about how to get young people to the table and how to integrate them into political processes. I mean, ask them what they want to see from us! We can be doing so much more to make sure that they are there to drive some of this narrative creation. And they know the tools better than we do. Let us be honest about that, too.

Sebastian Rodriguez, campaign strategist at European Movement International

To begin with, let us stop being so obsessed with the word 'democracy'. I think we are so attached to that word, which means a lot historically, but, for average citizens who have been asked to vote every four or five years, trying to put a coin into a trust machine for so many years without getting anything in return, democracy should probably not be your leading message.

I am not saying we should not talk about democracy, but I am saying we should focus on values that people actually hold dear: freedom and rights, how to protect them and how to gain new rights, for sure, but also how to protect what we have. We are more afraid of losing something we already have rather than not gaining something else that we do not have. The rights of our cousin who is part of the LGBTQI+ community, or the rights of marginalised people, are not to be taken for granted. The way we protect them is not only by voting, but also by being active in our societies every day. This can mean anything, from volunteering with an association that takes in abandoned animals, to becoming a member of a political party. Both are meaningful ways to contribute.

You can watch the video interviews [here](#). You can watch the recording of the panel on our [website](#) where you can also find more information about the [panellists](#).



ELECTIONS IN THE ERA OF ALGORITHMIC MANIPULATION

With elections under way across south-eastern Europe, the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) has been monitoring election campaigns across the region ahead of polling day. Its report *[TikTokcracy in the Balkans - a blueprint for fighting algorithmic](#)*

[manipulation in Europe](#) examined how TikTok and other platforms were used to spread misleading information and amplify certain candidates in Romania and elsewhere. At Connecting EU 2026, BFMI Director Antoinette Nikolova presented the organisation's findings on Bulgaria.

The BFMI's trackers on Bulgaria, produced with its technical partner Sensika, examined how difficult it has become to distinguish genuine political support from coordinated attempts to create an impression of popularity online. According to the report, coordinated networks amplified content supporting Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's former president and leader of the newly-formed Progressive Bulgaria coalition, ahead of the country's parliamentary election in April 2026. His coalition went on to win an absolute majority.

The BFMI and Sensika began monitoring the online campaign before polling day. Their first tracker, published one month before the vote, concluded that Rumen Radev already had a commanding presence on social media.

The scale of that online presence was remarkable for a country of just over six million people. According to the report, the hashtag bearing his name attracted 90.4 million views across 2,700 TikTok videos. The report also found that the 30 largest pro-Radev Facebook groups had a combined 1.3 million members, while some were gaining between 4,000 and 6,000 members a week and publishing as many as 130 posts a day.

According to the BFMI and Sensika, much of the online infrastructure supporting Radev did not come from the official channels of a long-established political organisation. The researchers said that it had instead been created by renaming and repurposing existing Facebook pages and groups.

According to the report, one page previously dedicated to second-hand car parts became 'Rumen Radev, the new Prime Minister'. The report said that another was renamed 'Bulgaria and Russia, Slavic Brothers', then became an online village marketplace before eventually re-emerging as a pro-Radev group.

The BFMI describes the practice as 'audience laundering'. It says that when a page changes purpose, it retains its followers, its history and the credibility it has built with the platform's algorithm, allowing a political campaign to inherit an established audience instead of building one from scratch. According to the report, around 30 Facebook pages and groups feeding the pro-Radev network had been created mainly in this way.

The researchers also identified coordinated and inauthentic activity across several platforms. However, they stressed that the problem was not confined to a single political force. Their second tracker documented such activity involving three parties and serious anomalies associated with two others.

The report also examined what it described as the growing use of hashtags as tools of political manipulation. Rather than simply promoting their own messages, coordinated networks were said to flood opponents' hashtags with hostile or misleading content. According to the report, the main TikTok hashtag used by PP-DB, Bulgaria's pro-European, anti-corruption coalition, became so saturated with hostile content that the coalition shifted its communications strategy towards the personal accounts of its leaders, reducing its ability to reach undecided voters. The report also found that critical content linked to GERB, Bulgaria's main centre-right party, outnumbered favourable posts by approximately 17 to one.

In other cases, the report found that networks flooded hashtags with near-identical positive posts to create an artificial impression of popularity and momentum. According to the BFMI, hashtags are no longer simply spaces for public discussion; they have become contested arenas in which the most organised networks can shape what users see.

The BFMI said the platforms responded differently to its findings. After being alerted to activity the organisation regarded as suspicious, TikTok removed 34 accounts. Meta, by contrast, stated that it had not identified coordinated inauthentic behaviour under its own criteria. The BFMI noted, however, that the company had informally referred to the removal of more than 200 networks.

For the BFMI, these discrepancies point to a broader regulatory weakness. The organisation argues that platforms apply different definitions and standards to similar forms of behaviour, making it difficult for researchers and the public to assess the scale of manipulation.

The report calls for common definitions of coordinated inauthentic behaviour across platforms, fully operational national Digital Services Coordinators in place before elections, and preventive rather than reactive use of the EU's Rapid Response System. It also argues that civil society monitoring organisations should play a formal role in Europe's response to threats to democratic debate.

'The manipulation we identified in Bulgaria was generated domestically, distributed algorithmically, and embedded within the very competitive dynamics of the election. The Bulgarian experience shows that timely, contextualised, on-the-ground evidence is the catalyst that moves platforms,' Ms Nikolova said.

She argued that safeguarding the information environment should be treated with the same urgency as protecting other systems on which society depends.

'I believe that the information system must be treated as critical and strategic infrastructure. When there is a problem with the energy grid or the water system, emergency and extraordinary protocols are activated. When we speak of information and elections, the situation is no less strategic,' she said.

The report concluded that by the time voters enter the polling station, the battle for their attention, and perhaps their vote, may already have been fought online.

Antoinette Nikolova is the Director of the [Balkan Free Media Initiative \(BFMI\)](#), an independent Brussels-based organisation focused on media freedom and the structural vulnerabilities that shape the information environment in south-eastern Europe. You can watch her presentation delivered at Connecting EU 2026 [here](#).



AI REVOLUTION – CHOOSE EUROPEAN

David Grunewald, AI strategist and trainer, delivered a session entitled 'From Chatbot to AI Agent: how AI is transforming the way we communicate' at Connecting EU. He explored the rapid development of AI reasoning models and AI agents, which are set to profoundly change how we organise our work. While these

tools can make us more efficient, our choice of technology carries wider consequences. Relying on American AI models raises questions not only about data sovereignty and the future of work, but also about the future of Europe's economic model. Below are extracts from his presentation, in which he outlined the risks Europe faces if it continues to rely on American AI models.

Choosing European might be a good approach because data sovereignty is not secured when working with American software solutions, even if they claim that their servers are located on European territory for GDPR compliance. The CLOUD (Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data) Act now enables the US government and the FBI to search for or obtain information passing through the servers of any US company, even if those servers are outside US territory. That is a big change.

We have developed the AI Act, which is great: we have created a kind of vault that protects citizens. But with the CLOUD Act, the Americans have the key to enter that vault and obtain the data. They can compel disclosure even if the servers are on European territory. They can also impose a gag or secrecy order, so the company is prohibited from informing its clients that a request was made to obtain information from its servers. That is even worse. Currently, this is a no man's land: there is no agreement to arbitrate this kind of conflict. In delicate situations involving ministries of defence or national guards, for example, a migration is already taking place in a number of European administrations. They are moving from Microsoft operating systems to Linux, leaving behind PowerPoint and Word and choosing European open-source solutions. I expect this trend to grow in the coming years.

Shouldn't we consider Mistral as the only player and AI system that the European Commission and everyone working here should choose? Mistral also has an AI co-worker and an AI operating system. Everything I have shown today could be developed with Mistral.

The choice between American and European AI models affects not only data sovereignty but also the macroeconomy. In the future, most companies will invest 10-15% of their salary expenditure in tokens – that is, the computing units used and charged for by AI systems. At European level, this could mean EUR 1 trillion leaving Europe rather than being reinvested in the European workforce. Instead, it would be invested in American AI solutions. This could undermine our economy because, rather than reinvesting that money here, we would replace some people with tokens – that is, with AI systems performing their work. That is another challenge. It is not just about data security; it is even worse. We should be aware of this and talk about it.

But the media are silent on this. I do not see much discussion about it, so for me it is a real threat. My final point is that the debate – or the battle – will not be about who has the best AI. It will be about electricity, because these AI players are effectively transforming electricity into tokens. What will electricity cost in Europe? EDF, the French energy company, and other electricity suppliers are currently making 10-year deals with the big players – the giant hyperscalers that have enormous servers in Europe and the United States –

to secure sufficient electricity. If we accelerate the development of more Mistral-like AI systems and larger servers in Europe, how are we going to power them if we have already committed our electricity to US-based AI? That is the challenge.

David Grunewald is the founder of *Pluginto.ai* and a recognised AI expert with over 28 years of experience in digital strategy and business leadership. Certified by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management in *Artificial Intelligence: Implications for Business Strategy* (2023), he specialises in AI transformation through training, strategic consultancy and organisational audits, with a focus on prompt engineering, AI agent creation and automated workflows.

You can watch the whole session 'From Chatbot to AI Agent: how AI is transforming the way we communicate' [here](#).



FACTS ARE FACTS: JOURNALISM'S FIGHT FOR TRUST IN THE AGE OF AI

As fabricated images and videos become easier to create, the greatest threat may not be that people believe every falsehood, but that they stop believing anything at all. At the Connecting EU seminar, Deutsche Welle's Jochen Spangenberg argued that journalism's strongest defence lies in fact-checking and verification, transparency and practices as old as the profession itself.

A photograph appears to show a scene from Gaza. It looks authentic because it is authentic – but it was taken in Syria in 2016. The image itself has not been manipulated; its context has. For **Jochen Spangenberg**, Deputy Head of Research & Cooperation Projects at Deutsche Welle, that distinction captures one of today's most persistent information problems.

'We're seeing footage, images in this case, that are taken out of context, that are taken from somewhere else, pretending something that they are not,' he told participants at the Connecting EU seminar in Sofia. Such deception, he stressed, remains more common than fully AI-generated content.

Yet generative AI is rapidly changing the scale and sophistication of the challenge. Images, video, audio and text can now be produced cheaply and convincingly by almost anyone. This complicates the use of material posted by eyewitnesses and other people on the ground – content that can be indispensable when professional journalists cannot reach a location.

'There is a huge value in so-called user-generated content,' Mr Spangenberg said. 'But we are having the downside ... that technology is getting more and more sophisticated, and anybody these days, without hardly any cost on the consumer side, can produce fairly sophisticated digital material that is completely made-up.'

The consequences reach far beyond whether a single image is true or false. News fatigue, news avoidance and declining trust create fertile ground for those seeking not simply to persuade, but to exhaust. Mr

Spangenberg invoked Hannah Arendt's warning from an interview broadcast in 1974: 'If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.'

The aim of some disinformation actors is precisely to create that sense of overload and helplessness. In an information space saturated with conflicting claims, doubt itself becomes a weapon.

But resignation is not an answer. Journalists, communicators and citizens each have a part to play in bringing facts to their audiences and resisting the idea that truth is unknowable.

For all the novelty of artificial intelligence, the first line of defence is strikingly traditional: ask who, where, why, when and what. If those questions can be answered, then you're on the right track, regardless of whether the content is AI-generated or not.

Verification may begin with footage, maps, satellite images or specialised software, but it can also begin with a phone call. 'Just picking up the phone, ideally, and talking to somebody on the ground is another very useful way of investigating something,' Mr Spangenberg said.

The crucial next step is to show the audience the evidence. 'Make transparent to your audiences how you work and what conclusions you reach on what basis, because then they can re-check. They can challenge you if you make mistakes,' he said. Acknowledging errors and explaining them is better than quietly removing problematic material. Transparency protects credibility precisely because it does not pretend that newsrooms are infallible.

Deutsche Welle's team at the Research and Cooperation Projects unit has worked on free resources that train users to look and listen more closely (e.g., [Sharpen Your Senses](#)), guide them through the basic verification questions and provide access to tools for examining text, images, audio and videos (e.g., [How to Verify](#)). The InVID-WeVerify-vera.ai verification plug-in, in turn, developed in collaboration with European partners in several EC co-funded projects, now counts more than 160 000 active users (freely accessible for all in the [Chrome store](#) as a browser plug-in).

Still, tools are aids, not arbiters. When Deutsche Welle fact-checkers tested the same AI-generated image with different detection services, the results ranged from strong evidence of manipulation to claims that it was probably real. 'Technology does not solve all your problems,' Mr Spangenberg said. 'It can be supportive, it can be useful, but we are not at a stage where we can fully rely on AI tools or tools that detect manipulations.'

Detection systems also tend to lag behind creation tools: whenever a new generative model appears, detection models must be retrained. Access raises further questions. Who can use the best tools? Are they free, or reserved for those able to pay? And can researchers investigate the major platforms with meaningful access to their data? Although the EU's Digital Services Act includes provisions on platform data access, the reality still falls short overall.

Keeping pace requires more than buying software. News organisations need strategies that define how AI may be used, what is off limits and how experimentation fits with editorial standards. Above all, they must give staff the time, resources and training to adapt.

There is a human cost too. Fact-checkers and journalists may spend their days examining disturbing material from wars, attacks and abuse. This work requires preparation and coping strategies just as field reporting does. 'What you don't want is to suffer from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, or any other mental illnesses, because you're ... exposed to really horrific, awful material,' Mr Spangenberg said.

The contest is also moving into chatbots and large language models. Disinformation actors can flood the systems' underlying information environment with a particular bias or worldview, influencing the answers users receive. 'That is a new form of propaganda,' Mr Spangenberg said. Compared with traditional propaganda, it is remarkably cheap. 'It's all about controlling the knowledge space.'

This makes regulation and enforcement unavoidable questions. Europe has rules, but their force depends on whether authorities are willing to apply them to powerful platforms and providers. Free speech matters, he said, but 'there are, that's my personal view, certain limits'.

Can trust be restored in such an environment? Mr Spangenberg offered no simple formula. His answer was instead a call for persistence: verify carefully, explain the evidence, support the people doing the work and refuse to surrender the information space. And don't give up.

He closed with another line from Hannah Arendt: 'Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute'. His own conclusion was more direct: 'Facts are facts, and they are not a matter of opinion.'

Jochen Spangenberg is a media and communication expert working as Deputy Head of [Research and Cooperation Projects](#) at [Deutsche Welle](#).



AND THE WINNER OF THE CONNECTING EU 2026 PHOTO COMPETITION IS ...

The prize for the best Connecting EU 2026 photo went to **Jūratė Čilinskaitė**, communications coordinator at the Lithuanian Industry Trade Union Federation.

Her image, entitled *Microphone vs misinformation*, earned her a trip to Brussels in mid-March 2027 to take part in the EESC's Civil Society Week 2027.

Ms Čilinskaitė was one of the participants in the Connecting EU 2026 seminar, held on 6 and 7 July in Sofia. The event brought together EESC members, press and communication officers from EU civil society organisations and national economic and social councils, and journalists.

Participants were invited to capture memorable moments that conveyed the spirit of the seminar.

Ms Čilinskaitė said she saw the microphone in her photo as a symbol of dialogue – of giving people a voice and being willing to listen to perspectives different from our own. In this sense, it also represents a counterweight to misinformation.

'Misinformation is everywhere, and it is constantly finding new and increasingly sophisticated ways to reach us. In my view, one of the strongest ways to counter it is through conversation and dialogue – by talking,

discussing, listening and trying to understand people who think differently from us.

'This is particularly important when it comes to people who may feel left behind or pushed to the margins of society. We need to broaden our perspective, listen to different experiences and make sure that people feel that their voices matter,' Ms Čilinskaitė said.

Entitled *In defence of European values: the power of civil society*, the seminar examined how Europe can uphold its values as economic priorities shift and trust in democracy weakens, and what civil society can do to defend them. One of the themes explored was the impact of disinformation on public opinion and Europe's ability to restore faith in its democratic model.

The EESC Press Unit congratulates the winner and thanks everyone who submitted their photos.

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