



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society
January 2025 | GA

[The Grassroots View - S3, E 24 – Europe's endemic migration crisis: where are we now and how do we move forward?](#)

In this episode of our podcast, we explore the continuing migration crisis in Europe. The recent stand-off between Italy and France, both refusing to allow the Ocean Viking to dock on their shores to transfer informal migrants rescued off the coast of Libya, has pushed the issue back to the fore. Where does European migration policy actually stand right now? What has become of European solidarity since the tough trial of the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015? How did we come to have vulnerable migrants caught in a legal no man's land?

We'll be exploring the issue and looking for answers with **José Antonio Moreno Díaz**, member of the European Economic and Social Committee's Workers' Group and a lawyer specialising in migration and asylum; **Louise Guillaumat**, deputy operations manager at SOS Méditerranée, the NGO that operates the Ocean Viking and winner of the EESC 2016 Civil Society Prize, and **Tomas Miglierina**, Brussels-based correspondent for the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, with specialist knowledge of migration.

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EDITORIAL



Giulia Barbucci: "New year, new challenges"

Dear readers,

Every year comes with new hopes and dreams and newfound determination to pursue them.

In this new year, I look forward to moving beyond pandemic issues towards the new big challenges that Europe is facing in 2023 and beyond: the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, the green and digital transitions, the changing labour market and a shifting political mood in many parts of Europe.

Given the gloomy economic outlook for Europe this year, Europe must establish correct and clear priorities. This year begins with the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which intends to continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine while also focusing on the green transition and improving the EU economy, especially as this year we prepare to celebrate the single market's 30th anniversary.

In addition, 2023 has been proclaimed the European Year of Skills.

A workforce with the skills that are in demand also leads to innovation and ensures that no one is left behind both in economic recovery and in the green and digital transitions. Skills will therefore have a central role to play in meeting Europe's challenges.

While the European Year of Youth has come to an end, our focus on the subject will not. The Committee has prepared several opinions on youth over the past year, and continues advocating for Europe's policies and legislation to be [youth-proofed](#). The European Economic and Social Committee will continue to work toward solutions for young people that also take into account their demand for a better planet.

At COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, in November 2022, the Committee delegation included a youth delegate to represent the voice of young people on issues related to the climate crisis and sustainability. This year, we will continue to call for a stronger role in the negotiations for young people as well as for organised civil society as a whole in order to ensure social justice in the transformation process.

In 2022 our efforts have also been aimed at improving gender equality. The Committee organised a series of events to support the European Parliament's Gender Equality Week, addressing a wide range of topics affecting women, including their role in the social economy, women and energy poverty, domestic violence against women, access to finance for women entrepreneurs, and reproductive and sexual rights. The European Economic and Social Committee is committed to continue working towards gender equality and gender mainstreaming in all policy areas in this new year and beyond.

With so many challenges ahead, the European Union can only succeed by systemically involving European civil society in decision-making. Hopefully, together we can rise to these challenges. And hopefully, we will also have a chance in the new year to find once again the security, peace and understanding we had come to take for granted.

I wish Europe a productive year and I wish you all good health and happiness.

Giulia Barbucci, EESC Vice-President for Budget

DIARY DATES

22-23 February 2023, Brussels

EESC plenary session

27-28 February 2023, Brussels

Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference 2023

23-24 March 2023, Brussels

[Your Europe, Your Say! 2023](#)



"TO THE POINT"

In our column "To the point", we ask EESC members to highlight the key proposals the EESC is making to address a key issue affecting the EU.

In this issue, **Kinga Joó**, EESC member and rapporteur for the opinion, talked to us about the European Care Strategy and what it is meant to do: ensuring high quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union, improving the situation of both care recipients and the people caring for them, either professionally or informally.

KINGA JOÓ: "WE NEED HIGH-QUALITY CARE FOR ALL"

The [European Care Strategy](#) starts off by stating that everyone provides or receives care at some time in their lives. This is indeed true, but high-quality care for all is still not a reality for many in Europe and this was one of the push factors behind the strategy.

In our opinion on the strategy, we focus on a few key points. First of all, we emphasise that all care solutions need to respect individual choices, and by this we mean that a person or a family should be able to choose between care provided in institutional settings, at home or in the community, and nobody should be forced to make do with one form of care because of a lack of alternatives.

The gender equality dimension and how to tackle male-female stereotypes are central to the strategy as well as to our recommendations. We reiterate that efforts should be made to incentivise more men to join the care workforce and to ensure better sharing of care responsibilities within households.

The strategy ticks the right box by acknowledging that formal and informal care go hand-in-hand, that neither of them are exclusive and that both need support. Home care is often provided by informal carers. The majority of them are women and relatives of the person in need of care, who carry most of the burden, with the impact this entails on their professional and personal lives. We recommend identifying these informal carers and mapping their needs to effectively target them. We also see potential in skills validation schemes to facilitate recognition of their "invisible work".

In addition, we reiterate our proposal to launch a European Care Guarantee, in order to ensure life-long access to affordable quality healthcare and care services for everyone living in the EU. This instrument would contribute to addressing care deficits and promote decent working conditions for carers, including informal carers.

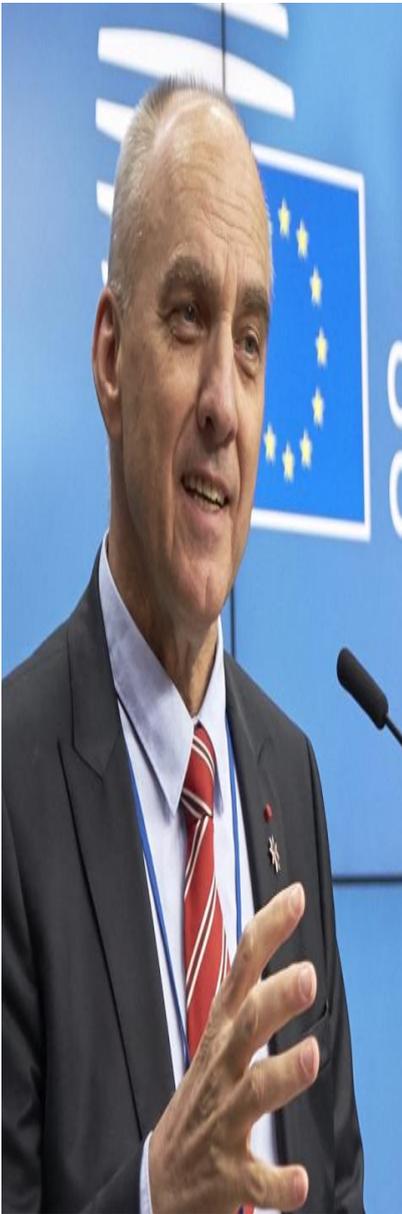
Finally, I'd like to stress that we also focus on the implementation, monitoring and evaluation aspects of the two Council proposals on early childhood education and care and long-term care as part of the strategy adopted by the Council in December 2022. We call for a mid-term review of the general objectives and of the specific targets, including the Barcelona targets.



"ONE QUESTION TO..."

In this month's "One question to..." column, we ask Jaroslaw Pietras, former Director General at the Council of the European Union, to talk about an issue that is on everybody's lips and mind these days: the energy crisis.

Jaroslaw Pietras is currently visiting fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels and visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. From 1990 to 2006, he served in his native Poland as Secretary of State in the Ministry of Finance, Secretary of State for Europe and Head of the Office of the Committee for European Integration. From 2008 to 2020, he was Director General at the Council of the European Union, covering a broad range of policy areas which included energy. With a PhD in Economics from the University of Warsaw, he is the author of a number of publications on the EU, sustainability and trade issues. He has also been a Fulbright Foundation scholar and a member of the board of the think-tank Bruegel (2008-2011).



JAROSLAW PIETRAS: "THE ENERGY CRISIS IS NOT OVER YET"

EESC Info: Jaroslaw Pietras, what do you make of the EU's energy market at the moment and what is the outlook for the future?

Jaroslaw Pietras: The gas price cap agreed on by EU energy ministers is well above the level that we are currently experiencing. The opening of the energy markets in the first days of 2023 was neither surprising nor dramatic. Gas and oil prices continue to fall, but at a slower pace. The current price level is comparable to that observed just before the Russian aggression against Ukraine. EU gas consumption has fallen by over 20%, with no critical impact on production or heating needs. Of course, consumers in every Member State had to reckon with high energy costs, but they were not exposed to freezing temperatures. The gas supply to households was uninterrupted. At the beginning of this new year, European gas storages are more than 80% full, which is a very good result compared to the average of the previous five winters.

European countries have turned away from Russia for their gas supplies, which now come mostly from other sources. This includes LNG imports, which in 2022 were 58% higher than in 2021. As the Financial Times noted (7 January, 2023), "The EU's LNG import last year is equivalent to 137 billion cubic metres worth of natural gas, close to the approximately 140 billion cm of pipeline gas it received from Russia in 2021". This means that the EU has significantly reduced its dependence on Russian energy supplies.

This is all good news, but beware; the energy crisis is not over yet. The above trends would not have been possible if the weather conditions in Europe had been difficult and low temperatures encouraged greater use of heating. Besides, some energy-intensive industrial processes have not

been fully restored. China's strict policy against COVID-19 has limited energy growth and demand, reducing global energy demand. These circumstances are out of Europe's control and may not be the same again. This means that energy markets in the EU are still under threat and, depending on how the situation will develop, difficult times could arise.

Not all EU Member States are equally affected by extremely high gas prices. However, as the EU's internal market is already quite interconnected, price shocks have affected every form of energy and everyone. Even before the invasion, Russia had an influence on gas prices in Europe. At the time, attempts to reduce dependence on Russian supplies were vigorously contested. The quake came after deliberate disruptions of gas flows from Russia. The gas price peaked at over €350 per megawatt hour on the spot market in mid-summer 2022. Such a high price immediately translated into the costs of other energy sources, in particular electricity, affecting millions of consumers.

At the time, EU Member States made huge efforts to fill their gas storage facilities to the level required by the EU. This was also a moment in time when gas prices were up to seven times higher than before the war. Such a cost is unbearable in the long run, which is why EU energy ministers discussed measures to limit the

uncontrolled rise in energy prices beyond endurable levels. Europe and its Member States acted wisely together and took a number of steps to stabilise energy markets, including pondering price caps, pooling purchases, imposing storage obligations and solidarity supplies, and much more.

Since the prospects for the rest of the heating season do not look too dramatic, the EU should start now to think about the coming winter and its ability to cope with possible difficulties in the future. Importing gas requires physical infrastructure that cannot be changed overnight. Europe is only connected by pipelines to some exporters, and changing sources of supply require new terminals. It takes time, but it has to be done quickly with the reliance on floating terminals like in the German port of Wilhelmshaven.

Summing up, the prospects for an acute gas problem are much lower. Alternative gas supplies are being sourced widely, new renewable energy sources are being installed at an accelerated pace, efficiency and energy savings are being seriously implemented. All this reduces the volatility of the energy supply and thus lowers the cost of gas. It allows for the diversification of energy sources and avoids disruptions caused by a sudden suspension of supplies from one source.

However, energy markets remain very vulnerable to supply shocks. In such a case, the price of gas may increase significantly to balance demand with limited supply. Therefore, the energy ministers were right to discuss and agree on a cap on gas prices, even at the relatively high level of €180 per megawatt hour and based on the most volatile TTF gas spot market. It is like a safety valve that is needed in extreme situations, but better when not in use.

NEW PUBLICATIONS



The surprise guest

In this column, we present the opinions, thoughts and comments of journalists and prominent personalities on topics that matter in today's Europe. This time, our guest is Ukrainian reporter Olena Abramovych. At the start of this new year, she shares with our readers her hopes for a better world.

Olena Abramovych is a Brussels-based Ukrainian journalist. Since the Russian attack in February 2022, her web-based TV channel, "Inter", has been part of the national around-the-clock news marathon covering the war across a large portion of Ukrainian territory. Olena has reported on the main political events in Brussels (such as NATO and EU summits) for Ukrainian TV channels since 2014. During the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2013-2014, she helped journalists from Brussels liaise with the political leaders and institutions in Kyiv. She also collaborated with Dutch TV channel NOS on the investigation into the shooting down of the MH-17

passenger plane by Russia.

Besides politics, she has covered social stories and volunteered to help Ukrainian workers in Belgium fight for their rights. Since 2016 she has also been organising a "Leadership summer school" in her hometown, Kovel, in north-western Ukraine - a free-of-charge mentoring programme providing guidance to teenagers as they prepare to choose their university studies. She has a Bachelor degree in teaching and a Master's degree in journalism from the University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.



Olena Abramovych: Ukraine 2023: the fight must go on – even after victory

"We never miss a chance to miss a chance", the saying goes. A saying which appeared in Ukraine in the years just before full-scale war broke out. It expressed frustration with the lack of fundamental reforms following the 2004 (Orange) and 2013 (Euromaidan) revolutions. Of course, each of them brought some changes, but every big fight raises high expectations and the disappointment when little happens is all the greater.

So, what do we need to do in order not to miss the chance for change this time?

In my view, a credible answer to this question was provided by our Nobel Peace Prizewinner, Oleksandra Matviichuk. Oleksandra is a human rights lawyer and civil society leader, so naturally in her powerful acceptance

speech she put the focus on human rights.

This may sound far from people's basic needs as described by Russian comedian Evgenii Petrosyan in his New Year greetings: "If you had a meal, took a bath and it's warm in your home, that means that you are lucky and were born in Russia". However, recent events have shown that turning a blind eye to human rights

violations in Russia, as European leaders did to keep their homes warm and preserve their economies, can spell disaster.

"A state that kills journalists, imprisons activists or disperses peaceful demonstrations poses a threat not only to its citizens," says Matviichuk. "In political decision-making, human rights must be as important as economic benefits or security. This approach should be applied in foreign policy too."

It is time to build a new system in the world which has human rights at its core, insists Matviichuk. This should not be left to politicians alone – civil society should be active as much as possible in this process. "We need a new humanist movement that would work with meanings, educate people, build grassroots support and engage people in the protection of rights and freedoms," says Matviichuk.

It is time – and a good time – to carry out a number of reforms in the EU and Ukraine. To switch to more ecological energy resources, without expecting Russian gas and oil supply to be restored. To find ways to stop disinformation and Russian propaganda, and, with the help of the EU, to reform the anticorruption system in Ukraine at long last.

As the war enters its second year we need to move towards all these changes. As we have seen, change will not come by itself after a war or revolution and Ukrainians know this very well by now. And this time there are huge expectations in the hearts not only of Ukrainians, but also Europeans. After the victory, the fight to build a new, sustainable and peaceful world is a responsibility we all share. Neither Ukrainians nor Europeans can afford to miss this chance again.

Olena Abramovych, Ukrainian Television, Brussels correspondent Inter TV-channel

EESC NEWS



Every year should be European Year of Youth

At its December plenary, the EESC discussed the issues affecting young people in the labour market. The debate rounded off the 2022 European Year of Youth and ushered in the 2023 European Year of Skills. The Committee advocated for a long-term strategy for youth engagement and recommended that European Years go beyond mere promotional activities and produce clear plans.

In the post-COVID-19 world, there is a new emphasis on the changing needs of the labour market, with all the opportunities and risks they entail, stressed EESC president **Christa Schweng** who opened the debate. "As part of the European Year of Skills, the EESC will continue focusing on the needs of our young people and the challenges that they are facing in our fast-changing world."

Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, explained his vision for Europe: "Better prospects for young people, which includes taking care of their security and responding to their aspirations for meaningful jobs and a strong and inclusive social life."

In a resolution adopted at the same plenary, the EESC also called on the EU institutions and national governments to strengthen youth engagement in decision-making and implement its proposed [EU youth test](#). **Katrīna Leitāne**, president of the EESC coordination group for the European Year of Youth, said that it is important to guarantee "a tangible and long-lasting legacy for the European Year of Youth and ensure that young people have a say in decisions affecting their future."

The Committee is looking ahead to 2023 and has issued [an opinion on the European Year of Skills \(EYS\)](#), expressing concerns over the overcrowded agenda and priorities of the EYS. The rapporteur, **Tatjana Babrauskienė**, said that "All activities carried out as part of EYS 2023 must be aimed at the best possible progress in all fields of education and training, with social and transversal skills among the 'right skills' to be promoted."

The opinion also encouraged the Commission to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers can validate their skills and competences in the EU and be offered up- and re-skilling opportunities to ease their way into the labour market. "Special consideration must be given to our Ukrainian friends. We want to foster a strong young Ukrainian generation and not create a new lost generation in Ukraine, as the Russian regime hopes to do", concluded **Commissioner Schmit**. (gb)



The financial dimension of gender equality still a blind spot in EU policies

The EESC held a debate at its December plenary on the role of finance and public recovery policies in promoting gender equality and the economic empowerment of women in the EU. The discussion was linked to the adoption of two opinions: one on a gender-based approach to budgeting and investing and the other on how Member States can improve the way in which the direct and indirect measures proposed in their Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) affect gender equality.

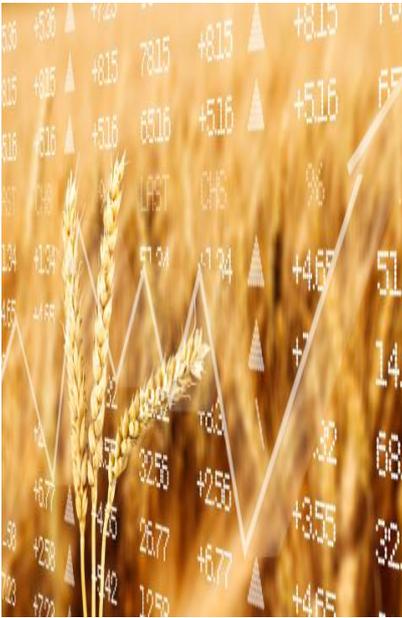
Gender equality is still far from being a reality in Europe, especially when it comes to economic empowerment and access to venture capital and funding. "We cannot afford to overlook women's potential in the post-pandemic recovery. Gender mainstreaming must become a reality in national recovery plans, as well as macroeconomic policy and global

development," said EESC President **Christa Schweng** when opening the debate.

Maria Nikolopoulou, rapporteur for the [EESC opinion on Gender-based investments in national recovery and resilience plans](#), added: "Gender equality is not only a women's issue: it benefits everyone. The participation of both women and men and of civil society organisations is crucial for detecting the areas that need to be addressed through the budget".

Ody Neisingh, rapporteur for the [EESC opinion on gender lens investing](#), said: "The financial aspect of gender equality remains a blind spot in EU policies. Even though gender lens investing and gender budgeting are gaining momentum among policy makers, there is still a lack of systemic focus".

Finally, **Cinzia Del Rio**, co-rapporteur for the opinion on gender-based investments, commented on gender-based measures in RRP: "Priority should be given to intensifying direct and indirect measures on gender equality when implementing RRP. This requires targeted public policies, and clear and sustainable investment channels with medium- and long-term resource planning". (tk)



Food should not be treated as a financial asset - it is not a commodity like others

The global food price crisis has been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, but is actually due to more structural and systemic problems in the commodities market, creating hunger and threatening people's livelihoods, highlighted the EESC in an own initiative opinion adopted on 14 December.

Fuelled by conflict, climate shocks and COVID-19, the food price crisis is escalating as the war in Ukraine drives up the costs of food, fuel and fertilizers. The food price index reached a record high in 2022 against a backdrop of increasing food insecurity worldwide.

However, the scope and scale of the current price volatility can only be partially explained by market fundamentals. One of the underlying flaws is the opaque and dysfunctional nature of grain markets.

"Do not play with food, used to say my grandmother. Yet today many people are forgetting the real value of food and are gaming on it," said the rapporteur for the opinion **Peter Schmidt**, president of the EESC Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment section. "We show clearly that the current commodity market is not delivering for sustainable development, climate ambition and just transition. On the contrary, it undermines the efforts to solve hunger and foster fair revenues and prices"

The EESC opinion stresses that the global physical grain trade is highly concentrated. Four companies control an estimated 70-90 % of global grain trade. "While increasing food prices threaten food security globally, large trading firms are profiting. This is unacceptable!", he said.

The EESC urges Member States and EU institutions to take the necessary steps to curb excessive commodity speculation, while recognising that commodity derivative markets provide key services to the producers and users of food commodities, such as risk management and price discovery. The EESC recommends:

- regulating the futures market for food derivatives, as was the case until the end of the last century;
 - regulating commodities and food indexes, in particular by regulating and banning commodity index funds and replication via swaps and exchange traded products;
 - addressing the financialisation of the food sector, e.g. by introducing a global windfall taxation on excess profits and a food speculation tax, as well as breaking oligopolies at all levels of the international food trade chain;
 - enhancing market transparency by improving environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting and non-financial disclosure of actors involved in speculation. (ks)
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[EESC backs mandatory competitiveness check for EU policies and regulations](#)

The competitiveness check should apply to any EU policy and law-making process, the EESC argues in a new opinion where it also makes the case for an EU "competitiveness agenda".

In the [report](#), adopted at the December plenary, the EESC argues that the impact of EU policies and regulations on the competitiveness of EU businesses needs to be assessed much more comprehensively and systematically than is currently the case.

A competitiveness check should cover legislation, fiscal measures, strategies, programmes, international agreements, and even the European Semester. It should look at their impact on businesses, employment, working conditions and compliance costs. It should consider how they can affect businesses in different sectors, of different sizes and

with different business models both in the short and long term.

Europe's share of the world's GDP has been falling for quite some time and could shrink to less than 10% by 2050. The short-term outlook is no rosier, with the ongoing aftermath of COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, soaring energy prices and dependence on key foreign imports. Add to that the green and digital transitions and you get a fairly good idea of the huge challenges that EU businesses are facing.

How do we ensure that competitiveness and businesses are given a more prominent role in EU decision-making? The EESC proposes a three-pronged approach.

First, at technical level, the EESC suggests **beefing up the European Commission's impact assessment** by making the competitiveness check mandatory and much more extensive.

"The European Commission already has to carry out impact assessments where the effects of an initiative on competitiveness are taken into account," said **Christian Ardhe**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion. "However, we also see a need for improvement, especially with respect to implementation and enforcement."

Second, at political level, competitiveness should be given proper weight when **shaping new initiatives**, which should be assessed on how they contribute to and support competitiveness.

Third, the Committee calls for a specific **competitiveness agenda** with the long-term goal of enhancing the EU's competitiveness.

"With this opinion, we really want to come back to the ways in which competitiveness is monitored, and take into account the complexities involved in this area," said **Giuseppe Guerini**, co-rapporteur for the opinion. "Today, competitiveness is no longer something that affects single businesses or companies – it really is about ecosystems. So, we need to take a more complex approach when we look at it."

The opinion was drawn up in response to a request from the **Czech presidency of the Council of the EU**.
(dm)



[Euro-Med cooperation after COVID-19: civil society organisations key to keeping the economy and society running](#)

The EESC's December plenary session featured a debate on the reconstruction and resilience of the Euro-Mediterranean region following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on digital literacy.

Highlighting the key role played by regional cooperation and dialogue and by the network of local civil society organisations in particular, the Committee's president **Christa Schweng** said that the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation were very important partners for the EESC and two major pillars of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

Álvaro Albacete Perea, deputy secretary-general of the Union for the Mediterranean, and **Josep Ferré**, executive director of the Anna Lindh Euro Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue Between Cultures, stressed just how crucial it was to strengthen the relationship between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean region.

Digitalisation is key for economic and social progress across the Euro-Mediterranean region. The own-initiative opinion on [Digital transition in the Euro-Mediterranean region](#), drawn up by Dolores **Sammut Bonnici** and adopted at the plenary session, points out that it is important to reduce the digital divide between individual countries, between urban and rural areas and between generations. (mp)



[To communicate fundamental rights and the rule of law effectively, the EU must focus on community-based values and human stories](#)

The EESC calls on the EU and Member States to work on better communicating fundamental rights and the rule of law towards the general public. In an opinion adopted in December, the Committee suggests focusing on fairness and justice and giving a voice to those who experience human rights violations first-hand.

The rule of law and fundamental rights can be perceived by some as overly abstract, distant, jargonistic and legalistic concepts. The Committee believes that this is a real danger which the EU needs to

address.

Cristian Pîrvulescu, rapporteur for the [EESC opinion "Communicating fundamental rights and the rule of law"](#), explained that "lack of clear communication and education at European and national levels on these principles benefits the enemies of democracy. We call for more support for civil society awareness-raising activities and stronger school curricula."

Co-rapporteur **José Antonio Moreno Díaz** stressed that "Individuals cannot defend their fundamental rights if they do not know what they actually mean. EU actors, institutions, Member States, and civil society can make a difference by translating abstract concepts into meaningful and practical issues, creating a shared European culture of fundamental rights and the rule of law."

The EESC opinion argues that human rights protection and the rule of law are not possible in the absence of a welfare state. The two are interconnected: when the welfare state no longer works, society may view the rule of law as an empty concept. This link is also recognised in the European Pillar of Social Rights, an essential policy tool for building a more inclusive Union.

The Committee urges all EU institutions to demonstrate zero tolerance for rule of law breaches in EU Member States. In doing so, the EU should continue to rely on the [definition of the rule of law provided by the European Commission for Democracy through Law](#), which offers a clear description of the key principles covered by the rule of law. (gb)



[Asbestos: the EU should go beyond the limit value proposed by the Commission](#)

The technical limit value for asbestos exposure should ultimately be set at a lower level than the Commission is currently proposing in a recent directive regulating the protection of workers from dangers of occupational asbestos exposure, the EESC said in an opinion adopted at its plenary session in December.

"Social partners can go beyond the new limit that will apply under the directive and take appropriate measures to further reduce the presence of asbestos fibres in workplaces," the EESC stated in the opinion on [Protection from exposure to asbestos at work](#).

The EESC said that the technical limit should ultimately be set at 0.001 fibres/cm³, after a reasonable transition period.

"We welcome the Commission's ambition to reduce the incidence of cancer and its specific efforts to minimise exposure to asbestos at work. It is a good basis for moving forward in the longer term towards zero

tolerance to asbestos exposure. But we believe that the EU should go beyond what is proposed by the Commission," said the rapporteur for the EESC opinion **Ellen Nygren**.

"There is no level of asbestos exposure that can be considered safe without the risk of cancer. Thus, despite the current ban on the use of new asbestos, there are still large amounts of work where workers are still exposed to this deadly substance," she warned.

According to figures presented at a recent EESC hearing, about 90 370 people die each year in the EU from asbestos-related cancer, demonstrating the need for a reduced limit value.

To meet this target, the EESC recommended drawing up a roadmap of complementary measures going beyond the Commission's proposal. They include financial support for businesses and regions that would otherwise be unable to achieve this objective.

Given that many people may be exposed to asbestos without even knowing it, the EESC called on the Commission to organise an information campaign to educate the public about asbestos and its harmful effects through all possible channels, including the media.

In the event that the risk of exposure is real or suspected, all workers should undergo checks with the results being documented, making sure their health is properly monitored and followed up every time they change job throughout their career. (II)



[Illicit assets: new EU directive will help combat organised crime](#)

The EESC at its December plenary welcomed the Commission's proposal for a directive on asset recovery and confiscation as an important step towards combatting money laundering and terrorist financing in the EU. Despite a general improvement in some of the Member States, the percentage of criminal assets that are frozen or confiscated remains extremely low across the EU.

The new directive improves cross-border cooperation between all authorities involved in asset recovery, encourages EU countries to develop national strategies and requires them to set up at least one Asset Recovery Office, a specialised body for tracing and identifying proceeds of crime and other crime-related property, the EESC said in its [opinion on asset recovery and confiscation](#), adopted at the plenary session in December.

"We think the Commission's proposal is very good, as it responds to the need to broaden the scope of the confiscation mechanisms. It also establishes cross-border cooperation mechanisms to increase the rate of asset recovery. At the moment, the rates are very low, with only 2% of criminal assets frozen and only 1% confiscated," said the rapporteur for the opinion **Ionuț Sibian**.

The new directive also adds a significant list of crimes to those contained in the Confiscation directive from 2014, including organ trafficking, kidnapping, environmental crimes and trafficking in stolen vehicles, to name but a few.

However, the EESC noted that the directive falls short of explicitly including migrant smuggling and illicit tobacco trade within its scope, despite the significant annual revenues of these criminal markets, worth an estimated EUR 289.4 million and EUR 8 309.3 million respectively, and urged the Commission to add them to the list.

The EESC also asked the Commission to be more ambitious regarding the social reuse of confiscated assets and to set a minimum percentage for social reuse for Member States.

"It is very important that affected communities get restorative damages directly and benefit from the returns from these damages. It is one area in which we expected developments, but there is a stagnation. Civil society has to be involved in managing and disposing of confiscated assets," **Mr Sibian** said.

Another EESC request was for the Commission to be more precise in setting out victims' rights to compensation. When ranking creditors, victims should be given priority, the Committee concluded. (II)



European Media Freedom Act: an important cornerstone in the defence of media freedom

The EESC welcomed the European Commission's initiatives for media freedom, but warned that mere recommendations and a soft-law approach would not be enough to ensure that the media in Europe remains free and independent from political, commercial and other types of interference.

In its [opinion](#) on the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) (Proposal for a [Regulation](#) and [Recommendation](#)), the EESC pointed out that media freedom and diversity are fundamental for the rule of law and liberal democracy.

"Media freedom is in danger. Authoritarianism is on the rise, including in Europe. The fourth estate is a firewall against this illiberal onslaught.

Therefore, strengthening media freedom is paramount and the EMFA is an important and very timely initiative," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Christian Moos**.

"We are observing more and more political and economic interference in several EU countries, both in public and in private media with close links to power, which is incompatible with the role of media as the fourth estate," said co-rapporteur **Tomasz Andrzej Wróblewski**.

The EESC gave its full support to the proposals that strengthen and defend the editorial independence of journalists and publishers. It also placed particular focus on the independence and impartiality of public media, pointing out that adequate and stable financial resources were needed to achieve this.

Another alarming problem identified by the opinion is the threat to media pluralism resulting from market concentration. Information monopolies certainly constitute a threat and taking action is warranted against media capture by media moguls and oligarchs.

Media ownership should be transparent and transparency requirements should be binding, although this should not lead to an excessive administrative burden for small media outlets. The lack of independence of some national regulatory bodies is also worrying. If not fully independent, they should not participate in the proposed European Board for Media Services.

The EESC underscored that as a regulation, the EMFA will have direct effect. At the same time, it questioned whether the soft-law approach of the recommendation was an effective way of achieving the EMFA's objectives.

"Mere recommendations are not enough to guarantee media freedom and diversity in the Member States. Free and independent media must be binding criteria for the rule of law report and for triggering the mechanism in Member States where governments violate media freedom and independence", **Mr Moos** concluded. (II)



Education should be at the heart of sustainable development

Education can help transform societies from fossil-fuel based to circular and sustainable. In an own-initiative opinion adopted in December, the EESC calls for transformative education that empowers young people to contribute to the green transition.

Humanistic values should be at the heart of education for sustainable development (ESD), with a focus on the environmental and social consequences of human behaviour. This requires education to be redefined, from pre-school to university and beyond.

"Sustainability is not only about the environment. There are many aspects, and all 17 Sustainable Development Goals are equally important. Education plays a crucial role as it is a key enabler for all other SDGs," said **Tatjana Babrauskienė**, rapporteur for the [EESC opinion: Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through](#)

[education.](#)

Critical thinking and informed decision-making should be taught in school, so that children can grapple with sustainable development issues. At a basic level, children should be taught about sustainable energy, consumption and production, reducing food waste and making responsible food choices.

A recently adopted [report on the Evaluation of the EU school scheme](#) makes additional recommendations on how to improve the school system in the interest of sustainable development. "Improving food education measures with class time devoted to the origin and value of food products and visits to farms and agri-food businesses could make the EU school scheme more effective and contribute to youth education on sustainable healthy eating," said the rapporteur **Arnold Puech d'Alissac**. The EESC also called for better use of funding for ESD, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Erasmus+, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus.

The implementation of ESD is currently at various stages across the Member States and will need to be tailored to local circumstances.

"We must lose no time in transforming education to ensure a sustainable future in the Member States, and it is key to actively include young people, teachers and parents in the process," said **Ms Babrauskienė**. (ks)



[Maritime industry: EESC renews warning on risks to technology sector](#)

The maritime technology sector urgently needs policies and investment to take on international competition, the EESC said in a recent exploratory opinion. The focus should be placed on skills training, finance and market access.

If Europe fails to implement a specific maritime industrial strategy, it risks becoming increasingly dependent on Asia for ships and maritime equipment. Many European harbours are already owned, in part or wholly, by Chinese companies. A sustainable strategy should reassess this ownership structure.

"The EESC believes that immediate action is necessary to strengthen Europe's maritime resilience, regain global competitiveness, protect Europe's strong position in complex shipbuilding and safeguard Europe's strategic maritime autonomy," said **Anastasis Yiapanis**, rapporteur for the [EESC opinion](#).

A maritime expert group and a European industrial alliance for the maritime technology sector should be established to help the sector regain its competitiveness.

Despite an EESC own-initiative opinion adopted in 2018, [The LeaderSHIP 2020 strategy as a vision for the maritime technology industry](#), which called for stronger support for the maritime sector, EU and national authorities had failed to provide the necessary policies.

The EESC expressed concern about barriers facing European companies wanting to do business in Asia. It called on the European Commission to make greater efforts to establish global trade rules and said it needed to act against foreign subsidisation and the injurious pricing of vessels as a matter of priority.

Existing bilateral free-trade agreements should be updated to ensure free market access for EU maritime companies and this must be included in future agreements. If international negotiations to achieve this are unsuccessful, the EU needs to consider unilateral actions to create leverage over its international competitors.

In its opinion, the EESC also noted the important role of the maritime technology industry in achieving a sustainable blue economy.

"The EESC calls for urgent measures that stimulate domestic demand for green and high-tech vessels, including an EU programme for fleet renewal and the retrofitting of existing vessels, in line with European Green Deal goals," co-rapporteur **Christophe Tytgat** said.

The EESC said its social partners and local manufacturers had waited in vain for stimulus to encourage the sector to switch to "green" vessels, alternative fuels and technologies to comply with the Fit-for-55 package. However, it welcomed the adoption of the [Zero-Emission Waterborne Transport partnership](#), which is working towards zero-emission shipping.

The EESC called for stronger financial support for the [EU Pact for Skills](#) and for campaigns to make the sector more attractive for all workers, from engineers to welders and electricians. Large-scale reskilling, upskilling and VET programmes are needed to ensure the sector can implement the green and digital transitions, the EESC said. (ks)



[Latin America needs a new social contract to stimulate economic recovery](#)

A new social contract for Latin America is needed, ensuring political accountability, inclusion, social protection and quality employment, said the EESC in an own-initiative opinion on the post-COVID socio-economic situation in Latin America adopted last December. Freely and democratically organised civil societies are the best starting point.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Latin America extremely hard, unveiling the weaknesses of the policies implemented over decades, which proved ineffective in facing the current challenges. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the economic turbulence by upsetting global delivery chains and contributing to increasing inflation.

The opinion, [entitled "Socio-economic situation in Latin America following the Covid-19 crisis - the role of civil society in the recovery process"](#), considers that the region needs a new social contract, which could be achieved through cross-cutting agreements between socio-economic groups, between regions and between generations.

Commenting on the role of civil society, EESC member and rapporteur for the opinion **Josep Puxeu Rocamora** stressed: "Europe and Latin America are committed to democracy and the rule of law, which means that civil society will be actively involved, playing a leading role in development and in overcoming crises, promoting the necessary dialogue for a new social contract".

Europe needs to strengthen its bonds with Latin America, especially focusing on the social, green and digital transitions. "We urgently need to invest in more efforts to build alliances with like-minded partners in Latin America," said **Mr Puxeu Rocamora**. "We have taken this relationship for granted for too long. We have to make an effort to catch up as we are facing strong competition from other actors right now".

This alliance requires the full recognition and participation of its organised civil societies, human rights organisations, trade union and business organisations, and environmental associations, said the EESC. (at)



Swedish presidency of the EU: EESC joins conversation around priorities and programme

At a meeting of the EESC held in Stockholm on 15 December, the Swedish State Secretary for EU Affairs Christian Danielsson outlined the political direction of the upcoming Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which has asked the EESC to provide input on six key issues.

Support for Ukraine and a focus on the EU's green transition and competitiveness would be among the watchwords of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in January-June 2023, the EESC heard.

At a meeting of the bureau, the EESC's steering body, held in Stockholm on 15 November 2022, EESC president **Christa Schweng** emphasised that, with all the challenges ahead, the EU could only be successful by

constantly involving European civil society organisations.

"Given the gloomy economic outlook for Europe, we need to set correct and clear priorities", she said. "Ensuring recovery and supporting businesses and people confronted with high inflation and especially high energy prices is of key importance for our economies, our societies, and our democracies."

Christian Danielsson, Swedish Secretary of State under the Ministry for EU Affairs, said: "We should not shy away from the fact that priorities are important, but the major task of the presidency will be the presidency itself: to move work forward and achieve results which are good for the citizens, the Member States and Europe. We will put enormous effort into it."

Mr Danielsson stressed that the Swedish Presidency would continue to help Ukraine with humanitarian assistance, as well as support for Ukraine's path towards the EU, and focus on improving the performance and competitiveness of the EU economy.

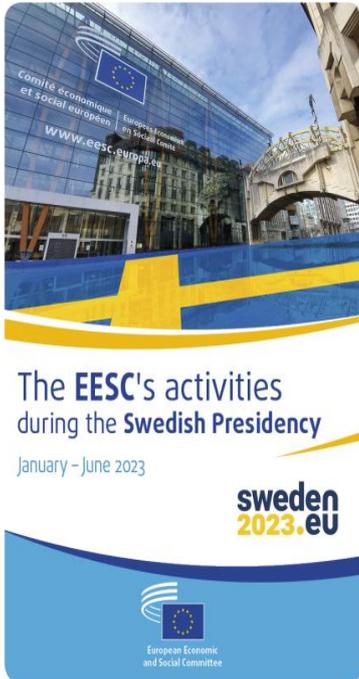
More specifically, the Swedish presidency would focus on:

- speeding up the climate transition
- strengthening the EU's competitiveness for the jobs of the future
- safeguarding the EU's fundamental values
- providing security for EU citizens and strengthening the EU's role in the world
- combating organised crime

The Swedish presidency has asked the EESC to provide its input and expert advice on the following topics, in the shape of "exploratory opinions":

- The Single Market at 30 – how to further improve the functioning of the Single Market
- The transition to a long-term sustainable transport system
- Young people's role in the green transition
- The advantages of modern industrial wooden construction
- Further enhancing the EU's digital competitiveness
- Competence and skills development in a context of the green and digital transition

More information can be found on the EESC's latest brochure "The EESC's activities during the Swedish presidency" available on our [website](#). The brochure has been published in English, Swedish, French and German. (mp/dm)



NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



[2023: time to adopt a competitiveness agenda](#)

By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

The first six months of 2023 are the right time to push for a competitiveness agenda to be made a top priority for the EU.

2022 has been an *annus horribilis* for Europe. At a time when Russia has brought war back to the European continent, assumptions and expectations of a lasting peace have been shattered in the wider European space.

One thing is crystal clear: without peace, there can be no prosperity. The Employers' Group has been fully supportive of EU action to assist Ukraine in its time of need and to start work on rebuilding Ukraine, even before the war is over.

While we continue to invest energy in helping Ukraine, however, we have also continued in 2022 to push for the EU's recovery. We have been assertive in our work for the Conference on the Future of Europe to call for a more decisive focus on competitiveness, by establishing the good practice of having a competitiveness check to build a stronger and more resilient economy. The Commission and the EU presidencies have been very receptive to this call and that instrument is now being prepared. More importantly, it is becoming increasingly clear to all that the EU must adopt a Competitiveness Agenda that centres on the sustainability and strength of enterprise. Only in this way can we guarantee a healthy society in which we can afford to provide citizens with a good quality of life.

Looking towards 2023, we need to maintain the sense of urgency. We must step up efforts to develop an ambitious and forward-looking agenda that takes due account of the needs and concerns of business. The current situation calls for a number of fundamental objectives:

- Competitive access to the factors of production (energy, raw materials, labour, capital and data)
- Realise the full potential of the Single Market and its freedoms, by creating a fully-fledged Digital Single Market.
- Ensure that open and rules-based foreign trade is made another pillar of the EU economy.
- The green and digital transition - which we strongly support - must be achieved in a cost-effective way that fosters entrepreneurship and innovation

The first six months of 2023 are the right time to push for the competitiveness agenda to be made a top priority. In a world rife with uncertainty, there is one thing we can be sure of: without a prosperous and competitive Union, the social wellbeing of our society is at serious risk.

Read the full article [here](#). (dv/kr)

Visions of forced labour: an ILO exhibition at the EESC

THROUGH
THEIR EYES
Visions
OF FORCED LABOUR



By the EESC Workers' Group

An [ILO exhibition](#) displayed at the EESC last December presented the best cartoons from an ILO competition conveying the harrowing stories of people trapped in forced labour all over the world.

A staggering 27.6 million people were in situations of forced labour according to ILO's estimates for 2021.

People are subjected to all sorts of intimidation compelling them to work against their will, such as deliberate withholding of wages, threats of dismissal, forced confinement, physical and sexual violence. The list is very long. The phenomenon is widespread across the world and the situation has worsened with the COVID pandemic. Among the most vulnerable are children, women and migrant workers. According to ILO estimates, women and girls make up 11.8 million of the total number of people in forced labour. More than 3.3 million of all those in forced labour are children.

But facts and figures don't fully communicate the human story behind them. This is why an [exhibition was hosted at the EESC](#) at the initiative of the Workers' Group President, **Oliver Röpke**, in collaboration with the ILO. It gathered the [best cartoons from an ILO competition](#) conveying the experience of those trapped in such intolerable working conditions all over the world.

Such initiatives lead us to reflect upon the actions that can be taken to end this scourge, such as addressing decent work deficits in the informal economy, as urged by the ILO. An [ongoing EESC opinion](#) by Workers' Group rapporteur **Thomas Wagnsonner** focuses on the prohibition of products made with forced labour on the Union market. During the opening of the exhibition, Workers' Group President **Oliver Röpke** said: "While this exhibition makes clear the hardship of those in forced labour, it also explores what we can do when we work together and take firm action – and we are taking action. It is for this reason that we want to see the ratification of the 2014 protocol to the ILO forced labour convention by all EU Member States!" (mg)



Séamus Boland re-elected President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

On 14 December, members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC re-elected Séamus Boland as group president for another two and a half years, by acclamation.

Séamus Boland will chair the group for his second half-term, from April 2023 to September 2025. The Irishman, who is a farmer and represents an organisation for rural and community development at the Committee, has chaired the group since October 2020. Mr Boland has been a member of the Committee since 2011.

The eradication of poverty and the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in combating poverty will remain the overarching priority during

his presidency.

"Poverty is heading for an all-time high as a consequence of COVID-19, climate change and the geopolitical turmoil due to the war in Ukraine. It affects all spheres of life and prevents us from achieving a sustainable future for all," said **Séamus Boland**. "Poverty eradication therefore remains the overriding priority of my presidency and civil society organisations play a pivotal role in combating poverty. CSOs help voice local concerns, define local needs and find local solutions. This is crucial for attaining the first Sustainable Development Goal, which is to eradicate extreme poverty everywhere."

For 2023, Séamus Boland proposes concentrating the work of the group on the following priority areas:

- Resilient European health and care systems;
- Climate change, energy poverty and vulnerable groups;
- Skills, digitalisation and vulnerable persons;
- The role of CSOs in defending and strengthening European democracy;
- Empowering young people and protecting children.

During its meeting, the Civil Society Organisations' Group also nominated candidates for other leadership positions at the Committee for the second half of the 2020-2025 term.

- **Krzysztof Pater** as EESC Vice-President in charge of the Budget
- **Baiba Miltoviča** as President of the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and Information Society (TEN)
- **Ioannis Vardakastanis** as President of the Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion (ECO)
- **Panagiotis Gkofas** for Quaestor

These nominees will be confirmed by a vote during the Committee's mid-term renewal in April 2023.

To find out more, continue reading at: europa.eu/!mmX8NV (jk)

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