



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

February 2023 | GA

[The Grassroots View - S3, E 25 – A digital Europe: between regulation and innovation](#)

In this episode of The Grassroots View we take stock of digital transformation in Europe. Digital innovation has the power to transform our industries, societies and lives. It can also be a threat if not properly regulated. Where does the EU stand compared to the rest of the world? What are the challenges and opportunities ahead? How can Europe secure and hold a competitive position, while safeguarding the rights and welfare of its people?

We explore the issues and look for answers with **Tanya O'Carroll**, technology and human rights expert, **Jennifer Baker**, a Brussels-based journalist specialising in technology, politics and digital legislation, and EESC members **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier** (Employers' Group), director general at the Portuguese Business Confederation (APED), **Franca Salis-Madinier** (Workers' Group), vice-president of the EESC Digital Transition and Single Market Observatory, and **Giuseppe Guerini** (Civil Society Organisations' Group), president of the European Confederation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives. (tk)

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

On 24 February 2022, when the war in Ukraine started, we at the EESC immediately condemned the unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by the Russian government.

Over the last year, we expressed our solidarity with the Ukrainian people in many ways, calling for firm actions at both EU and national level. I am proud of the Committee and its hard work to assess the consequences of the war on Ukrainian and European people and businesses and how to best support Ukraine and its civil society.

We adopted two strong resolutions and a third is to be adopted in the February plenary. The first resolution, passed in March 2022, concerned the economic, social and environmental impact of the war. The second resolution, passed in June, strived to be forward-thinking, looking at the post-war relief and reconstruction of Ukraine. Notably, the EESC called for the EU to grant candidate status to Ukraine – a decision the Council took a few days afterwards. We have also opened our doors to representatives of Ukrainian civil society organisations, such as Promote Ukraine, with office space and logistical and administrative support.

The war in Ukraine will remain top priority for Europe. Hopefully we will soon be able to start working on the reconstruction of Ukraine, which must be sustainable, transparent, green and digital. A genuine involvement of social partners and other civil society organisations will be needed for the recovery.

Although there is grief, sadness, anger and pain, which needs to be acknowledged and heard, I am deeply touched by the strength of the Ukrainian people, their hope, courage and resilience. We have also seen people, businesses and communities across Europe show their support and solidarity for Ukraine's people.

At our January plenary debate Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, stated "Relentlessly, Ukraine is fighting for democracy, freedom and justice. And fighting for us too." I fully agree. Europe will only be safe with a free and democratic Ukraine!

Christa Schweng
EESC president

DIARY DATES

28 February 2023, Brussels

Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference

1-3 March 2023, Brussels

Civil Society Days 2023

22-23 March 2023, Brussels

EESC plenary session

23-24 March 2023, Brussels

Your Europe, Your Say! 2023



TO THE POINT

In our column "To the point", we have asked **Stoyan Tchoukanov** to tell us, in a nutshell, what the EESC is proposing to improve the new [Urban Wastewater Directive](#) (ehp)



STOYAN TCHOUKANOV: "WE HAVE GONE TOO FAR WITH POLLUTION"

With its opinion the EESC calls on the European institutions to start addressing water as a priority and develop an "EU Blue Deal": a radical effort to anticipate needs, preserve water resources and adequately manage related challenges through a comprehensive and coordinated roadmap.

Clean water is one of our most precious resources. It is crucial for the functioning of ecosystems and our society as well as for socio-economic activity. Since 2022, when a number of scientific studies found microplastics in the human bloodstream and in breast milk for the first time, the need for urgent, decisive action has no longer been questioned. Pollution has gone too far, but we don't know how far, and our knowledge on the subject is still at an early stage.

The proposed Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive is very constructive and well-structured. It has the potential to bring the EU rules up to date by addressing remaining sources of untreated waste water and new pollutants, as well as improving the energy and circular economy aspects of wastewater treatment in line with the Green Deal and the digitalisation of Europe.

The proposal extends the scope of the directive to cover agglomerations from 1 000 population equivalents (p. e.), meaning that small towns will also have to collect and treat urban wastewater, and can seek EU funding to do so.

The EESC strongly supports the implementation of the "polluter pays" principle to ensure the affordability of water services and to cover the cost of removing micropollutants from the wastewater. Urban run-off and sewer overflows are a hotspot for pollution, including antimicrobial resistance genes, pharmaceutical residues and toxic substances that put aquatic life and human health at risk, and should be collected and properly treated before being discharged into receiving waters.

With our opinion, we call on the European institutions to include wastewater in a larger vision, and to start addressing water as a priority and develop an "EU Blue Deal": a radical effort to anticipate needs, preserve water resources and adequately manage related challenges through a comprehensive and coordinated roadmap, setting ambitious targets and actions linked to agreed milestones.





"ONE QUESTION TO..."

In this edition, we ask **María del Carmen Barrera Chamorro** about another aspect of the thorny issue of energy, which we also addressed last month.

A member of the EESC, **María del Carmen Barrera Chamorro** is the author of a new report on [Energy policy and the labour market](#). (ehp)



MARIA DEL CARMEN BARRERA CHAMORRO: "AN ENERGY TRANSITION THAT WORKS FOR JOBS"

EESC Info: What is the impact of the energy transition on employment in regions undergoing the transition and what are the EESC's proposals to address them?

Maria del Carmen Barrera Chamorro: Experiences so far have varied widely, with some successes and many failures. But ensuring the success of the energy transition when it comes to jobs is paramount. Without guarantees of sustainable employment, social protection and business support for the transition, there will be no competitive and healthy future in Europe.

The EESC believes that territorial energy transition plans should be accompanied by appropriate arrangements or agreements for fair social consultation, in which creating, preserving and safeguarding sustainable quality employment and support for people are necessary conditions in the design, implementation and evaluation of the measures planned, including the funds received to promote the energy transition.

We also need to better integrate labour market policies into environmental and energy legislation and policies, offering incentives for sustainable quality employment. Funds will be needed to share the costs of temporary or permanent restructuring processes and professional retraining programmes to improve employability in a decarbonised economy.

This should be backed up by social welfare policies such as guarantees of universal access to energy services, replacement income, adequate minimum income, etc. The integration of these policies, as part of the development plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights, should always be achieved through social dialogue and collective bargaining.

Stronger public and private investment and social compensation policies are also vital, given the negative effects on the competitiveness of EU businesses and SMEs, as well as on the most vulnerable households.

Finally, we need a renewed cohesion policy that prioritises the mutual links between the energy transition, labour markets and regional development. This requires monitoring and evaluation mechanisms on the sound use of funds in order to enhance the role of local and regional authorities and the social partners.

NEW PUBLICATIONS



[The surprise guest](#)

Tetyana Ogarkova is a Ukrainian journalist, essayist and literary scholar based in Kyiv. In our 2022 special issue dedicated to Ukraine, she was our first guest to explain the tragedy surrounding the war in her country. Now, in February 2023, one year on from the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, she shares with us her thoughts on the experience of this year of death and suffering and the lasting impact it has had on the Ukrainian people's collective psyche.



Tetyana Ogarkova: "The day of victory will come but it will not bring normality back"

On 24 February 2022, the lives of millions of Ukrainians were turned upside down. Now, when we say the word "victory", we expect that day to be the way things used to be. A normal day, a day of peace, a 23 February 2022 one might say.

But no. For us, there will never be another 23 February. There will never be another day the way things were before.

We have walked past the graves in the Iziium forest in the region of Kharkiv. We have visited villages such as Kamianka or Dolyna, between Iziium and Sloviansk, reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic film, where ten or so people live in the ruins of their homes with no water or electricity. We have looked into the eyes of the mother of Volodymyr Vakoulenko, a children's author, who was killed by the Russians in his village of Kapitolivka, near Iziium. It took months for her to recover his body. We have seen the ruins of Sviatohirsk and jumped at the explosions in the liberated city of Kherson, which the Russians continued to bomb while we were inside the museum of art - the collections stolen by the occupants.

How can we possibly think we can return to 23 February with these images indelibly imprinted on our minds? "Here I wiped away my children's blood", an elderly woman told us pointing to the stairs in a private house in the village of Bezruky in Kharkiv. Her 8-year-old granddaughter and her 38-year-old daughter had been killed there by a Russian mine in the space of a second, one beautiful summer's day in 2022. The child was reading a book. She had good marks at school.

Victory? If, on 23 February 2022, we had been shown what was before us, as in a film, we would certainly have been stupified - paralysed with terror - and most probably unable to act. However, we have gone through this first year of war, day after day, constantly doubling our efforts. Civilians and military, men and women, children and adults. These are ordinary people who have shown they can achieve extraordinary things. Some have done so by signing up voluntarily. Others by paying their taxes and giving more every day to support the army. Others have devoted their

free time to different voluntary activities, from weaving camouflage nets to making trench candles. Children have gone to school where classes are disrupted by air raid sirens, and young people have gone to university, despite power cuts.

Yet no-one knows what to expect. All we know is that we will continue to advance, all together, day after day, towards victory. Because we know all too well what will happen to us if we give up. The graves of Iziium will be reproduced in Kyiv. The city of Lviv will be bombed like Kherson. Khmelnytskyi nuclear power station will be targeted the way Zaporizhzhia power station was. We know this - we have seen it and witnessed it.

And when we shut our eyes, we still see the faces of those who will never see victory. Iryna Tsvila, our friend from Brovary, who loved the roses in her garden, took up arms on 24 February and died two days later defending Kyiv. Mykola Rachok, my literature student, who loved cars and adventure novels, died fighting near Pokrovsk in July 2022. Roman Barvinok, the violonist, who played Vivaldi across from the Presidential Palace in spring 2020, died on the eastern front in August 2022. And so many others. Tens of thousands of others.

The day of victory will come and it will not be like 23 February. But what are we not prepared to do to bring it closer?

[Thank you to our 2022 guests](#)

As we approach the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, we would like to thank the journalists, writers, photographers and activists from across Europe who have shared their stories and testimonies with us throughout this first year of war: **[Nadija Afanasieva](#)**, **[Vitaly Portnikov](#)**, **[Olga Czaiko](#)**, **[Tetyana Ogarkova](#)**, **[Olena Abramovych](#)**, **[Olga Vegera](#)**, **[Vasyl Kushmus](#)**, **[Kostas Onisenko](#)**, **[Marta Barandiy](#)**, **[Jowita Kiwnik](#)**, **[Slawek Kaminski](#)**. (ehp)



EESC NEWS



EU competitiveness is becoming more important than ever

At the EESC's January plenary session, EESC members discussed the EU's response to geopolitical challenges with Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament. She agreed with EESC President Christa Schweng that competitiveness, together with strategic autonomy, is crucial in the current challenging times.

Ms Metsola paid tribute to the Ukrainian people for their brave resistance to the Russian aggression and stressed that the European Union had rallied together like never before to provide Ukraine with financial, humanitarian and military assistance. She said: "Ukraine is fighting for democracy, freedom and justice. And fighting for us too".

Referring to the 30th anniversary of the single market, she emphasised the importance of competitiveness: "We must return to growth and lower our dependencies, while doubling-down on the green and digital transitions. Europe should play to its strengths and make sure our active trade policy brings benefits to Europeans every day".

For EESC President **Christa Schweng**, these aspects are essential for the prosperity of people and businesses in the EU: "It's a make-or-break moment, and only through coordinated efforts can we successfully build a more resilient, fair and sustainable future in which nobody is left behind".

The discussion also touched on the EU's response to external economic factors such as the American Inflation Reduction Act, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the volatility of fossil fuel prices, and internal challenges such as the lack of a skilled workforce that Europe is currently experiencing.

The debate highlighted that civil society has a critical role to play in improving EU policies and the way they are implemented, and that Europeans want a bigger say in the EU, a point proven during the Conference on the Future of Europe. (mt)



2023 Swedish Council Presidency: Ukraine still tops the agenda

The Swedish government at the EESC January plenary stressed that crisis management measures will be the focus of its six months at the helm of the EU. Guaranteeing security for Europeans and upholding the rule of law and fundamental rights will be the main priorities of its presidency of the Council of the European Union from January to June 2023.

During a plenary debate on 25 January 2023, EESC president **Christa Schweng** pledged the Committee's full support for the presidency: "This is an incredibly challenging time to take over the presidency, as the EU is experiencing a harrowing war at its borders. The EESC welcomes these priorities in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, as we must not let our security or our values be affected. We stand by Ukraine."

Jessika Roswall, Swedish Minister for EU Affairs, said that the Swedish Presidency considered close cooperation with other EU institutions and bodies, including the EESC, as paramount and looked forward to staying in close contact and maintaining an open dialogue.

Mentioning the presidency's top priority, she stressed that "Sweden is taking up the presidency at a time of historic challenges for the Union. Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine will continue to dominate the European agenda."

The Swedish Presidency will work to uphold European unity and make the Union greener, safer and freer, focusing on:

- Security
 - Competitiveness
 - The green and energy transitions
 - Democratic values and the rule of law. (mp)
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Single market should serve people, and not the other way around

To mark the EU single market's 30th anniversary this year, the EESC's January plenary hosted a debate with commissioner Margrethe Vestager to discuss ways to overcome what could be the biggest challenge for the next generation.

The single market is widely considered the EU's greatest achievement, but ongoing crises, such as climate change, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have shown its vulnerability to unforeseen disruptions. How do we achieve the green and digital transitions in the EU without infringing the free-market principles and hurting the competitiveness of European businesses? The Commission has a plan to overcome these issues and will unveil it in February.

At its January plenary, the EESC suggested specific ways to further develop the single market, while recommending focusing on Europe's competitiveness. EESC President **Christa Schweng** said: "Only a competitive Europe can create prosperity and wellbeing, as well as sustainable solutions to climate and environmental problems. It is vital to provide EU businesses with a favourable environment in which to innovate, invest and trade, including a level playing field with foreign competitors."

The European Commission's Executive Vice-President **Margrethe Vestager** acknowledged that the single market is something the EU needs to keep working on, while recalling that "Europe would be a completely different place if the single market hadn't been created thirty years ago".

One of the key elements of the debate was the issue of state aid for economic recovery and the twin transitions. There's a growing fear that this will put smaller economies and global trade at risk if it becomes more than a short-term boost.

The debate ended with statements by the president of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group **Séamus Boland**, the president of the EESC's Workers' Group **Oliver Röpke**, and a member of the EESC's Employers' Group **Felipe Medina**. (tk)



Sustainable development network warns about risk of a "lost decade for the 2030 Agenda"

A debate held at the EESC on 24 January revealed that the EU is failing to meet the objectives of the UN's 2030 Agenda. Yet there is hope. The EU has the opportunity to take the lead, including through financial support. The EESC plays an important role in monitoring progress.

The EESC January plenary hosted a debate with **Guillaume Lafortune**, Vice-President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UN SDSN), on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Mr Lafortune presented the [2022 Europe Sustainable Development Report](#), written with the support of the EESC. According to **Mr Lafortune**, the EU is failing to meet the objectives. In the meantime, progress is

deteriorating across the world, and developing countries in particular, which face severe financing constraints, are lagging behind.

The report recommends that the EU advocate within the United Nations system for a global plan to scale up international finance for the SDGs. EESC President **Christa Schweng** echoed this idea by highlighting the importance of the EU's leadership in achieving global transformations.

The EESC will also play a key role in the European Commission's First Voluntary Review in July 2023, gathering stakeholders' views on progress towards the SDGs. The EESC recommended a cross-cutting approach to the goals, considering the interrelated nature of the SDGs and their respective targets, and proposed launching a new platform to foster structured civil society engagement on SDG-related policy. (gb)



[The EU must ban forced labour products and uphold human rights](#)

The EU must fight all forms of forced labour and become a world leader on human rights, urged the EESC in an opinion adopted at its January plenary session.

In its opinion "[Forced labour products ban](#)", drawn up by **Thomas Wagnsonner**, the Committee backs the European Commission's proposal to ban products made using forced labour from the Union market, stressing that it is key for all EU Member States to ratify the 2014 Protocol to the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s 1930 Forced Labour Convention.

The EESC is also pleased to note that the proposal encompasses the fight against forced child labour and calls on the Commission to speed up this process by including existing ILO conventions on child labour in the scope

of the regulation.

Mr Wagnsonner said: "The promotion of economic, social, cultural and labour rights and therefore the eradication of all forms of forced labour and exploitation is crucial to secure the EU's global leadership on human rights and democracy in particular".

To prevent forced labour, the EESC emphasises the importance of international cooperation and the institutional anchoring of organised civil society in the Commission's new proposal, recommending guidelines to assist companies, a specific database with risk indicators and a benchmarking system. (mp)



[Energy price crisis: the EU must support consumers and businesses](#)

The EU's response to the energy price crisis should aim to protect all households and businesses facing major problems paying their energy bills. This was the main message of the EESC's [opinion](#) on Euro area economic policy 2023 adopted at its January plenary.

The EESC supports the European Commission's two-tier proposal to protect the most vulnerable: up to a certain level of energy consumption, vulnerable consumers will pay below the market price.

However, the Committee warns that this policy should cover both people below the poverty line and the lower middle class, who will also find it hard to pay their energy bills at market prices.

The opinion's rapporteur, **Petru Sorin Dandea**, said: "The winter of 2022-2023 has created major problems in the Union. To really protect vulnerable households from the energy price crisis, the Commission's two-tier policy must be inclusive".

In order to prevent the shutdown of business activities, the EESC backs the Commission's proposal that Member States should make use of the State Aid Temporary Crisis Framework and urges them to use all possible means to help, particularly, small and medium sized enterprises.

To contain the rise in inflation, the European Central Bank has used the tools of monetary policy, but this can only be successful if coordinated with the fiscal policy of the euro-area countries. (mp)



[The EU should step up international cooperation to protect oceans](#)

Increased international cooperation is key to make oceans sustainable by 2030 and ensure security and safety at sea, says the EESC in a new [opinion](#) adopted at its January plenary session.

Given its complexity, ocean governance cannot be considered a purely "marine affair", but requires a multidisciplinary and integrated approach to support decision-makers at all levels.

The human impact on the oceans often originates in land-based activities. A significant proportion of marine pollution stems from the release of waste, pesticides, antibiotics, phosphates and plastics, not to mention the issue of unexploded ordnance.

According to the EESC, the EU's role as a lawmaker and as an international actor strengthening networks and partnerships is key, and different stakeholders should be effectively and transparently involved every step of the way.

"The EU has a leading role in efforts to support the oceans, but all countries need to play their part: only in this way will the new generations be able to still call our planet a Blue Planet," said the opinion rapporteur **Stefano Palmieri**.

In order to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and sustainability by 2030, the EU should focus on taking measures to safeguard the well-being of the marine environment and protect fish stocks, both of which are vital for many communities. (mp)



Security is more than defence

At its January plenary session, the EESC debated the EU's "Strategic Compass" vision for security and defence, arguing that security should be understood broadly, far beyond military defence. Civil society should not be a bystander in security issues: in times of crisis, it can have a stabilising role, as proven by the war in Ukraine.

In an own-initiative opinion on [The EU Strategic Compass](#) (SC) the EESC expressed the need for a broader definition, as the present concept of security in the EU is too narrow. "Security goes beyond mere military defence. In times of complex, hybrid threats, the concept of security should be expanded to also include aspects of energy, transport, digital, water and food security, citizens' security, and foreign interference," said **Christian Moos**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion.

The opinion argues that, in parallel with national capability, defence planning and joint procurement, the EU should continue to invest its limited resources primarily in civilian policies and mechanisms in order to enable conflict prevention. This is where civil society can make a difference, through its social and economic networks, together with its strong potential for public and cultural diplomacy.

The return of war to Europe with Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been a "wake-up call" for the EU's relationship with NATO.

"The EU and NATO have not fully explored the potential of their cooperation yet. Strengthening the European pillar of security and defence means strengthening NATO. When we are talking about boosting the EU's defence capabilities, it is not to compete with NATO but to complement it," said the rapporteur and EESC member **Peter Clever**. (mt)



The EU's new care strategy is a litmus test for social Europe

The European Commission's proposal for a comprehensive European care strategy that should guarantee to all Europeans the possibility of receiving high quality healthcare and care services throughout their lifetime has been welcomed by the EESC.

The EESC has hailed the Commission's proposals for a European Care Strategy as an important step towards achieving an accessible and affordable care structure in Europe which caters to the needs of care receivers from birth to old age and supports all care providers regardless of their employment status.

In the [opinion](#) adopted at its January plenary session, the EESC made several recommendations regarding the strategy and its two proposals, namely the proposals on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and on long-term care, adopted by the Council in December.

The EESC also renewed its suggestion to launch a European Care Guarantee. Similar to the EU Youth Guarantee, this instrument would help ensure quality healthcare and care services for everyone living in the EU. It would also address care deficits and promote decent working conditions for both formal and informal carers.

"In addition to being available, accessible and affordable, we also maintain that care should be inclusive, sustainable and human rights-based. High-quality care for all is still not a reality for many in Europe," said the opinion's rapporteur **Kinga Joó**.

The opinion stresses the need to prioritise the affordability and continuity of care services in response to the current shocks linked to the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and the cost of living crisis. It calls for proper funding for the care sector and for Member States to ensure that jobs in care are attractive and properly paid and valued.

"The approach taken in our opinion shares the concerns raised by civil society actors. It is based on the very ideal of a social Europe. We also highlight the role of the Member States, as they are the main pillar in the care strategy. If we do not convince them that they should take ownership of the issues listed and if they are not going to fill the gaps in their national systems, we will not go very far with the strategy," said the co-rapporteur **Zoe Tzotze-Lanara**.

Key recommendations set out in the opinion include supporting families in their fundamental role in care, a swift mapping of the needs and realities of family carers and informal carers, achieving gender balance and equality in both the formal and informal care sectors and better protection of the rights of all care workers, regardless of their migration and residence status. (II)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS

The Green Deal Industrial Plan: A work in progress that must deliver a Competitiveness Agenda



By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

The Commission's proposal is incomplete and needs to be inserted into a long-term vision for a Competitiveness Agenda.

On 1 February 2023, the European Commission presented its first response to US President Joe Biden's unprecedented climate package, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), supporting American industry with a record USD 369 billion in subsidies. The proposal ticks many boxes –predictable regulatory framework, access to funding, adequate skilled workforce and open trade agenda – but after a first assessment, EU employers concur it is very much a work in progress if we are to achieve long-term competitiveness.

First and foremost, we should not forget the other part of the equation of the green transition, the digital transition.

Second, it is useful to point out that subsidies on their own will not do the trick. The real problem the IRA poses is not only the amount of subsidies, which are actually less than what the EU's budget and different funds offer, but rather the combination of subsidies and low energy prices in the US. It is the two together that make the IRA problematic for Europe. Add to the mix the comparatively low productivity of EU industries and indeed we are facing a very dangerous situation for the European economy. Subsidies have already divided EU countries and will ultimately lead to the fragmentation of the single market, harmful races and will weaken regional development.

Third, the Commission's plan seems to be based on an old-fashioned "pick the winner" approach. It hints at a scenario under which policy-makers would set goals for industrial capacity based on sector-specific analysis, and considering the whole supply and value chains, thus determining which businesses to favour for regulatory and financial support. The term "cleantech sector" is already arbitrary, as the green transition takes place across all sectors and all kinds of businesses.

We all know where the real problem lies: competitiveness. There is an urgent need to regain ground and the transition to the green economy provides us with such an opportunity. But being competitive and creating jobs must become a way of life and central to our policy-making. This is why EU employers are advocating for a Competitiveness Agenda.



[Strong social dialogue for a genuinely social Europe](#)

by the EESC Workers' Group

The EESC Workers' Group warmly welcomes the [social dialogue initiative](#) recently published by the European Commission. It sends a strong signal to EU workers and citizens who are currently faced with a serious cost-of-living crisis.

Agreements between the social partners on fair wages and working conditions can be strong mitigating measures against the effects of inflation on working families, as they were during the pandemic, when collective bargaining across Europe made short-time working arrangements, teleworking and health and safety protocols possible, and paved the way for a fairer recovery.

That is why social dialogue and collective bargaining are the backbone of the European social model and a basic element of democracy and sustainable economic growth, and should be preserved as such.

However, social dialogue is far from being a reality everywhere in Europe. In a number of Member States the social partners lack organisational capacity, and newer forms of employment such as platform work are less likely to be represented. The share of workers covered by collective agreements at national level has declined significantly in the past decades.

The European Commission's initiative is therefore warmly welcomed as a step in the right direction, although more clarity will be needed as regards the role of the Member States in establishing binding mechanisms for the involvement of the social partners. (mg)



[Building skills to make the labour market open to everyone](#)

by Ioannis Vardakastanis, Vice-President of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

The European Year of Skills should be an opportunity to bridge gaps – a year to address the barriers preventing many in the EU from being able to find quality and fulfilling employment. At a time when the EU's workforce is dwindling, it is more important than ever to focus on tapping the potential of those who are too often cut off from the open labour market by investing in skills.

Developing skills that match the requirements of current and future job markets will of course have to take into account the increasing digitalisation of our economies. This means bridging the digital skills gap, not least for groups such as persons with disabilities and older people who are still active in the job market. In our modern societies,

digital literacy is not only a tool that helps people to find their place in the labour market, it is also a prerequisite for living independently and something that nobody should be deprived of.

However, promoting skills that future-proof our economies should not be overly dependent on digital competences. The European Year of Skills should also be a platform to promote the importance and value of employment in technical, manual and vocational sectors. The skills required in these sectors have been undervalued for too long, as have the crucial functions they serve in our societies. With the green transition forming a cornerstone of the EU's blueprint for transforming its economy in the years to come, there is a particular need for technical and manual expertise to implement real transformation. To achieve this, many workers will need to reskill, and the opportunity should be seized here to also reach out to people typically excluded from the labour market and develop their skills.

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



Civil Society Days 2023

This year's Civil Society Days will shine a light on the fundamental role of civil society organisations in ensuring and safeguarding both social cohesion and resilient democracy in Europe.

Europe is facing unprecedented and pressing challenges: a war on its soil, recovery from the COVID crisis, a game-changing energy crisis, but also many threats to its democratic model in a fast-changing, ever more digital world. This flagship EESC event will address the resurgent, existential threats to democratic values in an open and inclusive conversation, debating questions such as:

- How do we see participatory and deliberative democracy in the future?
- How can we democratise the European economy?
- How should civil society be funded?
- What do digital rights mean to citizens?
- What skills do we need to enhance democratic participation?

Join us at the EESC and be part of the debate with stakeholders and European institutions on the crucial role organised civil society has as an agent of change in overcoming the current crisis.

More information and registration [here](#). Follow us on twitter @EESC_LiaisonG #CivSocDays.



Students welcome EESC members in run up to Your Europe, Your Say!

Members of the European Economic and Social Committee are visiting thirty-five schools in the EU Member States, and seven candidate countries in February and March to prepare them for "Your Europe, Your Say!", the youth assembly to be held in Brussels on 23 and 24 March 2023.

This year, the EESC's event for youth "Your Europe, your Say!" (YEYS) will be held for the 14th time, returning to an in-person format after a three years' break due to COVID-19. Entitled "Youth Democracy Dialogues", it aims to help young people understand what European values stand for and what active citizenship means in a participatory democracy.

EESC members acting as mentors to students in this hands-on initiation to EU representative democracy are now in the process of visiting the selected school in their country (the photo pictures **EESC Vice-President Cillian Lohan** with students from Schull Community College

in County Cork, Ireland).

The 16- to 18-year-old students will then come to Brussels in March and participate in workshops and working groups to reach a consensus.

Their proposals on fostering youth engagement and active citizenship will then be submitted to the European institutions and high-level European policy- and decision-makers.

This youth event is intended to raise awareness about the way groups with different interests reach social agreements.

The final event will take place on 23-24 March. Speakers will include:

- EESC President **Christa Schweng**
- EESC Communication Vice-President **Cillian Lohan**
- **Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, the youngest politician ever elected to the European Parliament** (Greens/European Free Alliance Group), vice-chair for the subcommittee on tax matters
- **Ismael Páez Civico**, board member at the European Youth Forum
- **Themis Christophidou**, director-general for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture at the European Commission

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