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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Dear readers,

In this issue, I want to share with you our Committee's deep commitment to driving change and mobilising civil society to shape the future of Europe.

As the Vice-President for Communication, I have witnessed first-hand the transformative power that lies within our institution. It is a power rooted in our ability to not only identify critical issues but also to inspire collective action.

This year, the EESC has harnessed this power to focus on two pressing areas: water conservation and the forthcoming European elections.

Water, the essence of life on our planet, has taken centre stage in our Committee's agenda in 2023. The EESC is leading the way as the first EU institution to prioritise water-related issues with a comprehensive EU water strategy that focuses on safeguarding clean water resources, valuing water properly for the benefit of all, addressing potential conflicts arising from water issues and promoting sustainable water management.

Our EU Blue Deal initiative currently enjoys support from the European Parliament along with key stakeholders in the field. In September, President Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union letter of intent highlighted "Water Resilience" as a key priority for 2024 and announced a new initiative on water under the European Green Deal. This demonstrates a growing recognition of the importance of water and the need to take bold action to address the challenges facing our water resources.

Working together with stakeholders and civil society, we are committed to ensuring that water remains abundant and accessible for generations to come. Our partnership with Ewa Ewart and her powerful film, "Until the Last Drop," stems from our conviction that the fight to save water transcends boundaries and requires collective action, involving water organisations, artists and individuals alike.

Looking ahead, our attention turns to the 2024 European elections. These elections are not merely a democratic exercise; they are an opportunity for civil society to influence policy and shape the future of our continent. To that end, the EESC Communication Directorate is already closely

working with the other EU institutions and especially with the European Parliament's General Directorate for Communication, with which we regularly engage and work together.

To this end, we are preparing for the Connecting EU Seminar in Bratislava on 23-24 November entitled *European Elections 2024: why vote?*, where we will explore strategies to mobilise civil society organisations and ensure that their members turn out in force. We see mobilisation as a shared civic responsibility, and we are committed to actively engaging in this process to drive positive change and ensure that the voices of civil society are heard and valued.

Within that context of mobilising European citizens to vote in June's European elections, the seminar will constitute a strong platform to focus on engaging with a range of civil society players in order to invite them to activate their networks, contacts and stakeholders for that mobilisation in a spirit of a culture of dialogue.

I invite you to join us on this journey and to help us make a difference. Together, we can create a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

Laurenţiu Plosceanu
Vice-President for Communication

DIARY DATES

26 October 2023, Brussels

Call for an EU Blue Deal - High-level conference

23-24 November 2023, Bratislava

"Connecting EU" Seminar - European elections 2024: why vote?

13-14 December 2023, Brussels

EESC plenary session

TO THE POINT

"To the point" welcomes Pierre Jean Coulon, rapporteur for the opinion on *Individual and collective energy self-consumption as a*

***factor in the fight for the green and energy transition, and for economic and social balance*.**

With this own-initiative opinion, the European Economic and Social Committee is contributing to the strategic debate on investment in energy infrastructure for individual and collective self-consumption as part of a fair green and energy transition. The initiative means putting people at the heart of the debate on self-consumption and self-generation of energy if we really want these trends to be a lever for the green and energy transitions and economic and social balance. (mp)



PIERRE JEAN COULON: "BECOME A PLAYER IN YOUR ENERGY ENVIRONMENT".

Self-consumption, whether individual or collective, has been one of the few, if not the only, way to respond to several energy issues: greening production using wind, solar and even hydro renewable energy; the scourge of energy poverty, affecting more than 80 million Europeans.

Both the IPCC and the International Energy Agency regularly call for the mass roll-out of all available decarbonised technologies, including renewable energy. These technologies have an inherently local dimension. They are connected to the geographical areas in which they are based, and can be installed close to where energy is consumed. As a result, their development is leading to a revival of self-consumption in electricity, in other words direct consumption of locally produced energy.

For the past few years, European but, above all, national legislation, especially in some countries, has supported self-consumption, whether individual consumption particularly using photovoltaic panels on roofs, or collective, including photovoltaic or wind farms installed by energy communities, local authorities, cooperatives, etc.

Moreover, the EESC's opinion calls for every citizen to be genuinely placed at the heart of these trends and for both public authorities and local and regional authorities to support the developers of such projects.

Pooling and "smoothing" prices in a spirit of solidarity, would make it possible to provide practical responses to the energy poverty caused chiefly by the high prices experienced by many households. With this in mind, non-profit initiatives should be encouraged.

In order to manage these processes as efficiently as possible, smart meters should be rolled out across the European Union. This process must not be carried out under pressure nor should it be imposed. It should take place through education, enabling consumers to take real responsibility for making the best use of their data.
In this way, citizens can become genuine stakeholders in their own energy environment.



ONE QUESTION TO…

In our column "One question to...", we give the floor to **Maria Nikolopoulou** who argues why sustainable development goals (SDGs) shoud top the agenda of the future European Commission. **Ms Nikolopoulou** is the member of the EESC's Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section and the rapporteur of the exploratory opinion "EU and Agenda 2030: strenghtening the implementation of the SDGs", requested by the Spanish presidency of the Council of the EU.



MARIA NIKOLOPOULOU: WE CALL FOR AN OVERARCHING STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENT THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

EESC info: Why the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be one of the key themes and activities of the future Commission?

Maria Nikolopoulou: These days are critical for the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as the 2023 SDG Summit taking place in September in New York aims to mark the beginning of a new phase in accelerating the implementation of the SDGs with high-level political guidance.

The lack of explicit mention of the implementation of the SDGs in President Ursula Von der Leyen's State of the Union speech on 13 September shows that the SDGs are not the driving force for change in the EU's policies. There is a certain "SDG washing". Instead of considering them as an umbrella that defines our actions for systemic change, we are just taking fragmented decisions and stating how they affect the implementation of specific goals.

The incoming EU Commission should take the political commitment to implementing the SDGs seriously. Achieving the 2030 Agenda requires structural changes, innovative solutions, and collaboration among governments, civil society, businesses, and international organisations. We need a long-term transformative plan that will go beyond 2030. The EESC and other civil society organisations have been calling for an overarching strategy to implement the SDGs since the beginning. And this requires political courage and commitment not only to properly channel the available financial and human resources but also to restructure the way the administration works and to break silos.

We are experiencing unprecedented floods, drought and wildfires. We are witnessing how social inequalities are rising and with them social unrest and disdain for our current politicians and policy-makers. We are seeing how the big economic players are improving their market position and how it's getting harder and

harder for the small ones to survive. The implementation of the SDGs is the only reliable solution for all. Achieving the SDGs demands collective action, innovative solutions, and a renewed dedication to building a better world for current and future generations. We can't allow the uncertainty to govern our future!

NEW PUBLICATIONS



The surprise guest

In the **"Surprise guest"** column of our newsletter we have invited extraordinary people from culture, politics, science, media and public life whose work, commitment and dedication can inspire others to create unforgettable stories and testimonies.

Our guest for October is **Ewa Ewart**, a Polish documentary filmmaker, who impresses audiences with her courage, cinematic inquisitiveness and journalistic responsibility. She goes to the ends of the earth, where others do not, to tell the story of people fighting for a better life, be it on the war front or in the daily struggle for a clean environment and a decent life. Her film "Until the last drop" is about the threat of water destruction and the determination and sacrifice of people for whom water is life.

Recently this film was awarded the Grand Prix at the Green Film Festival in Deauville, and also won the special Prince Rainier III prize at the Monte Carlo festival. The film will be shown at the EESC as part of a series of events dedicated to the Blue Deal. (ehp)



Ewa Ewart: "We must join forces to protect our most precious resource: life-giving, fresh, clean water"

EESC info: You are an award-winning journalist and filmmaker who often deals with difficult issues, such as wars and people. This time the subject of your film is water. Why?

Ewa Ewart: The film "Until the Last Drop" tells the story of a different war – the stupidest of all. It is a story about the war man has declared on water – a source of life – in the name of progress. In a broader sense, it is a war on nature. A long time ago, man decided that life on earth should take place on his terms, and that the natural environment is supposed to serve man and his interests. This belief has brought us to the sorry state of our planet.

What challenges did you face while making the film?
I learned about documentary filmmaking at the BBC in London. The 1990s was a golden era for documentaries. There was money, and we travelled the world making films on various fascinating and relevant subjects. I am now a freelancer and I enjoy the freedom that freelancing offers. However, raising funds for a project can sometimes be daunting and time-consuming. I would say this is now my key challenge; getting the money for a film. Compared to that, the rest is plain sailing! Once I secure the budget, I see everything else as a promising and exciting experience. Making a documentary can be unpredictable, so I always have a plan B. More than anything else, I always tell myself that I will make a great film! The biggest challenge I faced with making "Until the Last Drop" was the weather! Almost 100% of our filming was outdoors, and we travelled on a very tight schedule to six countries. So any nasty surprises (weather-wise) could have cost us money and caused severe disruption to our filming plan. But we were lucky.

What role do you think the film industry can play in raising awareness and promoting action on water issues?
Documentaries can play a very significant role in educating and raising awareness. My journalistic background is in TV news, but I found that my passion lies in a longer news format. I love documentary films for many reasons, but one reason is of critical importance: documentaries offer you enough space to tell what happened and why it happened. You have time and space to create an in-depth context for complex events and important issues, and make them easier for a wider audience to understand. When I started working on the "Until the Last Drop", I realised that quite a few filmmakers had already made water-related issues the subject of their films. It was reassuring on one hand, but it also created an interesting challenge for me to come up with an idea that was fresh and unexplored. Well-made films on important issues have the potential not only to educate but to jolt people into action. We have already had many viewings of our film, and there are people coming up to us afterwards and asking what they can do. This is very rewarding.

What inspired you to focus on water?
In 2017, I was working on a film about how the oil industry destroys the rainforest. We were filming in the Ecuadorian part of the Amazon rainforest when a local community leader took me to their river. When he swiped a white latex glove he was wearing on the river's surface, it turned black. A thick, oily layer covered the entire glove. It greatly affected me. I think the encounter planted the first seed for the water documentary.

Why isn't the discussion on water part of the public debate?
One reason is rather simple. Water is still widely available and we take it for granted. Yes, water covers most of our planet's surface, but rivers – the main source of clean, fresh water – are less than one percent of all its resources. News of the millions of people suffering water shortages is primarily reported locally. Somehow we tend to believe that water problems affect faraway countries and are not of our concern. I hope our film will provide a shocking realisation that such a belief is utterly wrong. The other reason is that powerful lobbies behind water pollution and the reckless exploitation of water resources impact and exert a vast influence on political choices.

Fortunately, there are also some positive signs indicating that we are becoming aware that we must change the way we manage water resources. Last March, the first UN water conference in a generation took place. It was a clear recognition that we remain alarmingly off track in dealing with water problems and water-related goals, putting at risk our very existence. Each year, we celebrate World Water Day to remind ourselves that we need to get our act together to solve the water crisis, and since water is a uniting factor for all humans, we need everyone to take action. Let's hope such initiatives will keep growing.

What do you think is the most important thing for people to know about the water crisis?
The water crisis exists; it is genuine, and it keeps growing. It should sink into the collective awareness that time is running out. Unless we radically change how we manage water, we might be heading for a ruthless

awakening. This is one of the messages of our film. I hope those in a position to tame the crisis before it is too late will heed this message. One person who appeared in our film asked: "will the planet wait for us to wake up?"

What message you are sending to the European Union and the Member States? And what of the citizens, in particular the younger generation?

This is such a broad question! Firstly, I would like as many people as possible in the EU and in the Member States to watch "Until the Last Drop". And it is not about my vanity! I see the impact this film creates each time we have a public viewing. I want to believe this film will inspire decision-makers to help all these activists fighting for clean, healthy rivers. It is a disgrace that we allow Europe to have the most fragmented riverine system. It is a shame that Italy, the country that so richly contributed to European civilization, flows the most polluted river on our continent. The river Sarno, which was once regarded as a God, also ranks as the third-most polluted river in the world. Our quest for progress and development has turned this river into a foul-smelling corpse.

Is there any hope?

There is hope, and we talk about hope in the film. People are becoming aware that we do not have much time before it is too late to change how we manage water. These people are the activists who do their best to counteract the damage man has already caused to water. I place my hopes in these activists who have first-hand knowledge of the seriousness of these problems. These are the people who live with the rivers, live off the rivers and are the first ones to be affected by the decisions politicians make. The decision-makers should learn from them. We want to turn this documentary into a learning tool to educate about water. Piotr Nieznański, co-author and presenter of the film, came up with a programme called "CodeForBlue" addressed to teachers and young people. Today's youth will soon be deciding how to manage water resources. The current education system does not tell them the whole story about the water crisis. We want to fill this gap. We have started working to launch the programme in Poland.

What we should do now to save the planet?

We must all come out of our separate bubbles and join forces to protect and wisely manage our common, most precious resource: life-giving, fresh, clean water. A politician from the Minganie Regional County Municipality in Quebec, Canada, who supported the local efforts to protect a river and appeared in our film, said: "people want to get rich, thinking that it will make them happy. The economy in Western societies is based on such a way of thinking. If we don't shift our perception of development today, with the changes we see in our region and elsewhere in the world, we will all perish".

Ewa Ewart *is a journalist and an award-winning filmmaker who specialises in ground-breaking and influential documentaries. She was born and raised in Poland, but has spent most of her career at the BBC TV in London. She has travelled and worked in many countries, producing and directing programmes ranging from investigations to political and social observational documentaries. Her films have revealed new information about issues such as corruption in Boris Yeltsin's Russia, the secret prison camps in North Korea, the civil war in Colombia and the secret and illegal CIA extraordinary rendition programme for people suspected of terrorism. She has told some of the most memorable stories through her documentaries, such as that on the tragedy in Beslan, made for the first anniversary of a terrorist attack in which more than 170 children were killed. In the second film she highlighted the trauma still suffered by many child survivors five years after the atrocity.*

EESC NEWS



EESC celebrates success of "Fur Free Europe" Citizens' Initiative

On 20 September 2023, the EESC hosted a discussion highlighting the achievements of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Fur Free Europe". At its core, the initiative stands as a resounding call for a fur-free continent, pushing for a total ban on fur farming and on the sale of fur products within European markets.

The ECI "Fur Free Europe" has collected the backing of an astonishing 1.5 million European citizens, achieving the required thresholds in 18 Member States in less than 10 months. These figures reflect the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the most recent special Eurobarometer survey, both of which have resoundingly endorsed higher standards of animal welfare.

"The European Commission's current commitment to revising animal welfare legislation during its current mandate is a crucial opportunity to achieve a fur-free Europe", urged **Elise Fleury**, organiser of the ECI and Campaign Lead for Eurogroup for Animals.

Tilly Metz, member of the European Parliament and president of the Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals, echoed this sentiment: "The swift success of the Fur Free Europe ECI underscores the profound concern among citizens for exploited animals and calls for decisive EU action. A mere improvement of animal welfare standards will not do in this case. It is high time that we end this cruel and unnecessary business".

On 12 October, the Fur Free Europe ECI will present its initiative at a public hearing organised by the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and on Internal Market and Consumer Protection. The EESC will actively participate in this event to extend its support to the initiative. An upcoming EESC opinion will also specifically address the new proposals on animal welfare and animal transport conditions expected from the European Commission by the end of 2023.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** lauded this successful initiative and stressed: "I want to revitalise the EESC's active participation in ECIs and give them a democratic stage to influence EU legislation. Rest assured, the European Economic and Social Committee will not only carefully follow but also actively contribute to further developments on this subject". (gb)



MFF needs more ambition and more money

The EESC has adopted an opinion on the Mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework 2021-27 proposed by the Commission last June. The Committee feels that the proposal lacks the ambition to respond properly to Europe's key challenges. Short-term solutions are needed to address its shortcomings. The debate on the new MFF should start soon.

The Commission's proposal includes EUR 50 billion for the Ukraine Facility, EUR 15 billion for migration and external action, a EUR 160 billion investment platform called STEP, and an additional facility to address rising interest rates. The EESC criticised the proposal for lacking ambition and for not being connected to strategic foresight, calling for more civil society involvement. **Johannes Hahn**, European Commissioner for Budget and Administration, praised the EESC's influence and emphasised the need for EU cooperation.

Regarding the Ukraine Facility, the EESC supported using frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's reconstruction and called for a "major sustained commitment." The EESC was disappointed by the minimal allocation to STEP and the absence of a European Sovereignty Fund proposal. They called for the budget to be adaptable and to be aligned with political ambitions. The EESC continues to push for a more ambitious financing scheme for the EU's competitiveness. (tk)



A fair Europe starts at its borders

In an opinion adopted at its September plenary, the EESC took a closer look at the European Integrated Border Management Strategy (EIBM), and called for a shared strategy, improved coordination, and fundamental rights protection.

Ensuring the effectiveness of European border management is not only a matter of security. It's also about making sure we uphold the values that the European Union is based on. The EESC firmly believes that we need a clear plan to improve the process at our external borders.

The EIBM aims to enhance coordination between EU agencies and instruments and those of the Member States tasked with border management responsibilities. This must include a robust focus on information exchange and the cultivation of a common border culture guaranteeing the protection of human rights.

While national border institutions play a pivotal role, the EESC raises a significant concern that the strategy fails to specify the commitments of national border institutions. **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, the rapporteur for the opinion, and **José Antonio Moreno Diaz**, the co-rapporteur, consider it important that the EIBM framework be used to require from each Member State a fundamental rights plan in the area of border management,

complementing Frontex's activities.

The Committee also regrets that in the EIBM, the practice of pushbacks is not properly acknowledged and tackled and asks the Commission to devise clear plans in this respect and require national border institutions to avoid these unacceptable practices. Respect for fundamental rights is a legal obligation for all EU and national institutions and should be treated accordingly. Under no circumstances should EU foreign policy or cooperation policy be conditional on the cooperation of countries of origin in return and readmission processes. (gb)



2023 EESC winners in the EU organic awards: from Ireland, Germany and Austria

On 25 September, the EESC announced its winners in the three categories of the EU Organic Awards: Best organic food processing SME, Best organic food retailer and Best organic restaurant.

For the second year running, this event was organised together with the European Commission and other partners to reward excellence along the European organic value chain. The winners of all categories took part in a special ceremony held at the European Commission and hosted by the EU Commissioner for Agriculture, **Janusz Wojciechowski**.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said: "The EESC has been advocating for years for a more sustainable and inclusive food policy in the EU. I am proud that we are part of this great initiative bringing quality food closer to everyday consumers and covering all the steps of the agri-food chain. I would like to congratulate the winners of this year's EU Organic Awards and thank them for sharing their inspiring projects with us".

The winners are:

Best organic food processing SME: the Merry Mill, Vicarstown, Ireland

The Merry Mill is a family-run organic farm that produces a range of organic gluten-free foods in Ireland. Their mission is to provide high quality products that not only feed the body and nourish the soul but are sustainable, amazingly tasty and, best of all, have no negative impact on the environment.

Best organic food retailer: Gut Wulksfelde (Bioland), Tangstedt, Germany

Gut Wulksfelde (Bioland) has a 600 m² farm shop in which they sell the produce from their organic farm. They farm 450 hectares of land with over 50 varieties of vegetables. They also process meat, produce eggs and run a bakery that bakes bread for the farm shop.

Best organic restaurant/food service: Restaurant Luftburg Kolarik im Prater GmbH, Vienna, Austria

Since 2021, Luftburg Kolarik has been the largest fully certified organic restaurant in the world, with 1200 seats. The restaurant was founded in 1992 with ecological and social sustainability at the heart of their philosophy. (ks)



Cohesion policy 2.0: navigating towards a stronger, more inclusive Europe

At the request of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, the EESC provides insights on the future of cohesion policy, proposing recommendations for a more adaptable, socially focused "cohesion policy 2.0" to address evolving challenges like the pandemic, climate change and digital transformation.

At the heart of European cohesion policy lies an unshakable commitment to the principle that no one should be left behind. "We call for this to be preserved, despite any imperfections", says EESC rapporteur **María del Carmen Barrera Chamorro**. "Civil society partners stand ready to align their efforts with a robust EU investment policy that keeps this principle at its core. As Europe faces a shifting landscape, this steadfast principle remains a guiding light toward a more equitable future". Co-rapporteur **David Sventek** adds: ''To achieve the objectives of cohesion, it is essential to promote interaction between EU cross-cutting policies and cohesion policy, to bring all policies into line with the EU's fundamental objectives and achieve synergies''.

The EESC calls for a focused, adaptable EU cohesion policy, highlighting the impact of inequality on growth and competitiveness. It urges addressing disparities between Member States, regions and cities, with a focus on hard-hit areas. Tailored support for diverse groups and engagement with social partners are crucial. The EESC advocates a modernised, flexible cohesion policy that preserves SME sustainability and supports strategic technologies in large companies. Achieving true convergence entails enhancing regional resilience, targeting development needs and fostering partnerships for a more inclusive and adaptable Europe. (tk)



Revitalising EU economic governance: EESC's vision for success

The EESC has presented a set of crucial recommendations in response to the Commission's proposed legislative package

reforming the European Union's economic governance framework. While the EESC appreciates the intention of simplifying the framework, it advocates for critical adjustments to the proposal. These recommendations come at a pivotal moment, underlining the need for a balanced, adaptable, and sustainable approach to economic governance within the EU.

Amid EU challenges like the pandemic, geopolitical complexities and climate goals, EESC rapporteur **Javier Doz Orrit** advocates for more flexible fiscal and structural plans involving national democratic institutions and civil society, suggesting a permanent fiscal capacity for the EU and deeper economic governance. While the EESC appreciates certain aspects of the legislative package, it calls for substantial adjustments.

Co-rapporteur **Luca Jahier** urges prompt negotiations for a balanced, enforceable economic framework. Key proposals include replacing rigid deficit reduction rules with a more tailored approach, reconsidering automatic sanctions, and granting national governments a say in fiscal plans. The EESC also suggests treating green and defense investments differently, broadening the definition of public investment, and establishing an EU fiscal capacity by 2026. Inclusive governance involving social partners, civil society and parliaments is emphasised throughout the process.



EESC's evaluation sheds light on progress made by Member States in the mid-term implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility

The EESC has adopted an evaluation report on the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a vital EUR 723.8 billion instrument introduced in February 2021 to aid Member States in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. This report includes key recommendations from social partners and civil society organisations in Germany, Italy, Latvia, Portugal and Romania regarding the involvement of civil society in implementing the RRF.

The EESC's evaluation identifies issues with the RRF's effectiveness, citing delays and concerns about long-term implementation due to fund absorption, limited durations of plans and administrative capacity. Excessive requirements hinder SME access. While civil society views the RRF's objectives as relevant, alignment with national strategies requires improved coordination.

"Organised civil society deplores the lack of transparency in the process of defining and implementing the plan, and calls for structured and transparent dialogue, feedback loops and proactive involvement by means of an active monitoring committee", explains **Elena Calistru**, EESC rapporteur.

The report recommends improving access to timely and detailed RRP information, streamlining project implementation, enhancing flexibility in project selection and funding allocation, and establishing more effective, mandatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for long-term RRF impact assessment, with active civil society participation. (tk)



The EU has to ensure that civil society is protected, not attacked

The EESC has strongly criticised the EU for failing to ensure proper support and funding for civil society organisations working in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy.

In a debate with the president of Civil Society Europe, **Gabriella Civico**, held at its plenary session on 21 September, the EESC warned of the dire situation for CSOs in Europe, which are increasingly subject to a range of pressures, from financial constraints to smear campaigns and concerted attacks on their work and credibility from a variety of actors.

Furthermore, CSOs working on the most difficult social and political issues, including watchdog organisations and those promoting equality and non-discrimination, tend to have the most serious financing problems, and this has been seriously jeopardising their critical mission of holding those in power to account and preserving democracy in Europe.

In its opinion on *Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy*, adopted at the plenary session, the EESC said that this needed to be addressed immediately.

To this end, the EESC advocates setting up a financial instrument specifically dedicated to CSOs working on human rights and democracy within the EU. A platform similar to "Protect Defenders" for human rights defenders working in EU Member States should also be established.

A special focus must be put on the inadequate working conditions and meagre income of people employed in the civil society sector, who are often working under great stress, with enormous risks to their mental health.

"At a time when democracy is in crisis, the responsibility of European institutions is huge. We need more than just good intentions. We need concrete actions that help the development of European civil society, including in the candidate countries," said rapporteur for the opinion **Cristian Pîrvulescu**.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** announced that, in line with its recent decision to integrate "enlargement candidate members" into its work, the EESC will now also monitor developments affecting civil society in "EU hopeful" countries. To do this, it plans to extend the mandate of its Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group (FRRL) – which, since 2018, has carried out numerous missions to Member States to check on the situation of CSOs – to also cover EU candidate countries.

"We cannot let fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democracy stop at the EU border!", **Mr Röpke** said. (ll)



Revision of European Food Directives: Protecting consumers and promoting transparency

The EESC underscores the pivotal role of promoting healthy and sustainable diets in enhancing human health, preserving ecosystems, strengthening society and supporting rural communities.

Achieving these objectives requires a multifaceted approach, including increasing the availability of sustainable products, educating individuals on healthier dietary choices, advocating for product reformulation, and expanding mandatory origin labelling for specific items. These changes must align with current societal concerns and consumer demands while maintaining competitiveness and favourable working conditions within the agri-food sector.

''The opinion supports the Commission proposal of mandatory origin labelling for honey blends, but goes a step further by also requesting the percentages of each origin, based on the development of a reliable testing method. At the same time, "adulterated honey" is easily detectable; this is the most urgent measure to protect EU beekeepers; it could, and should, be enforced immediately'', says **Kerli Ats,** rapporteur for an EESC report on this issue.

European beekeepers and stakeholders in the honey supply chain face formidable challenges concerning the transparency of honey blends' origins. These challenges significantly affect their income and the broader European market situation. Current efforts to combat fraud and unfair competition remain insufficient. While the EESC welcomes the proposal to revise the Honey Directive by introducing mandatory origin labelling, it expresses reservations about the lack of ambition in implementing additional measures to combat fraud effectively.

The EESC strongly urges the adoption of more ambitious measures to safeguard European honey producers, enforce stringent marketing standards, institute systematic testing and traceability checks on honey imported into the EU, and mandate country of origin labelling for honey blends. The proposed labelling should detail the respective percentage share of each honey origin, presented in descending order.

Addressing the challenges in quantifying the percentage share of each honey origin in blends is paramount. The EESC emphasises the need for a swift and accessible analytical method to ensure the integrity of mandatory origin labelling, protecting consumers from fraud.

Efforts should also focus on developing a traceability system that assigns a unique identification code to all commercially sold honey, whether produced within the EU or imported. This system would make it possible to trace honey back to the beekeeper responsible for its harvest. However, it is imperative to ensure that these measures do not unduly burden companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, with excessive costs.(ks)



The EU needs more effective multilateralism to tackle maritime security risks, says EESC

The EESC calls for more joint actions under the EU Maritime Security Strategy, which aims to preserve EU sovereignty, security and competitiveness. The Committee supports the EU-NATO cooperation on maritime security and signals the importance of firm engagement with international partners to collectively tackle people smuggling and human trafficking.

At its September plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on the Commission's joint communication on the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan, highlighting the importance of multilateralism as a key policy for the EU's external action in the area of maritime security.

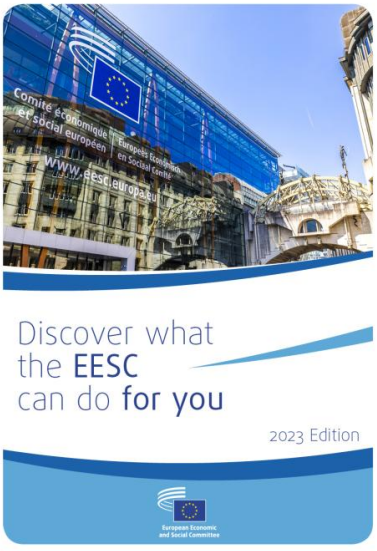
The EESC believes that EU-NATO cooperation should be further enhanced to deliver more effective coordination in different areas of common interest, including critical infrastructure.

Anastasis Yiapanis, EESC member and rapporteur for the opinion, said: "The Maritime Security Strategy is in line with the EU Strategic Compass. The maritime sector should be prioritised and understood broadly, especially in the context of the increasing hybrid threats."

Moreover, the EESC calls on the EU to step up engagement with international partners to tackle issues of mutual concern, such as people smuggling and human trafficking.

Mateusz Szymański, EESC member and co-rapporteur for the opinion, said: "The security of the crews should be a priority for the EU".

Regrettably, the proposal for an EU maritime strategy makes no mention of the role of civil society. The EESC stresses that continuous collaboration and constructive discussions are needed with EU civil society, in order to ensure public support for the Commission's proposal and future action. (at)



Updated: Discover what the EESC can do for you!

We have just published an updated edition of one of our most popular brochures about the EESC! As you know, we are not like other EU bodies. We are a unique forum for consultation, dialogue and consensus between representatives from different parts of "organised civil society".
Our members' organisations are intermediaries between decision-makers and the public. They offer a way for people to bring about change or to support causes they care deeply about.
In 12 pages, you can get to know us, our role and vision, our members and how we work, as well as some of our success stories. You can also find out more about the new EESC Presidency that took up office this year.

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NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Businesses call for speedy action to restore competitiveness

By Stefano Mallia, Employers' Group President

As the dust settles on the last State of the Union address by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, employers are pleased to see competitiveness back on the agenda after years of neglect.

Asking Mario Draghi to prepare a report on the future of European competitiveness is indeed good news when it comes to making business easier in Europe and regaining a competitive edge. Europe's share of the global economy has been declining for years and it is predicted to be less than 10% by 2050.

Just to take a few examples: Europe has some of the most productive retailers but has no online retail platform to match the size of leading US and Chinese online retailers. Europe has strength in software, too, but is not leveraging its position to establish a world-leading business-to-business software company.

The reality is that compared to our competitors, EU businesses are burdened by significant administrative obstacles that hinder their ability to invest and effectively undergo the green and digital transitions.

Many of the new initiatives mentioned by von der Leyen are at the core of our work, such as the delivery of a competitiveness check, fast-track permitting on wind energy, sectorial dialogues in view of supporting business models for transition, the Social Partners Summit at Val Duchesse, and last but not least Draghi's report on competitiveness, which must also integrate a look at the single market, which was totally missing from von der Leyen's speech.

But given that this legislature will switch to campaign mode at the beginning of 2024 for the European elections, allow me to be a bit pessimistic, despite the positive tone of this landmark speech. Time is short. To regain competitiveness we need political will now. We urgently need to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality. Time is not on our side.

The Employers' Group will organise an extraordinary meeting in Valencia at the end of November precisely to discuss the challenges and opportunities ahead.



Why you might want your bus driver to be rested – beyond the obvious reason

By the EESC Workers' Group

The European Commission is working on amending the rules on the organisation of minimum breaks and rest periods in the occasional passenger transport sector.

As most of us strive to reach our destination safe and sound, having a driver on the wheel of the bus that is well rested sounds like an intuitive idea. However, this is not always the case. Despite the term 'occasional', the work there is often neither seasonal nor occasional, but rather continuous. The proposed change would allow non-international passenger transport drivers to work for 12 consecutive days without rest, as is now the case in international transport – another sector suffering from chronic staff shortages.

This flexible approach to resting times, supposedly designed to tackle driver shortages, not only jeopardises road safety – and given that most drivers in the sector are in their 50s or older, the increased stress poses a great risk - but also most likely will worsen the very problem it is trying to solve. Making working conditions worse will certainly decrease the attractiveness of the job, as drivers in these positions often perform other tasks related to group handling.

Maybe we should consider improving working conditions, and support people wishing to enter the sector in terms of licences and permits, providing for safe infrastructure including resting facilities, and we might attract more drivers.



Conference on EU food sovereignty highlights the key role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers and calls for inclusive and sustainable food policies with a long-term vision

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

Fair prices for both farmers and consumers and truthful and transparent information are essential if the primary sector and consumers are to play their key role in guaranteeing strategic autonomy in European food production. This sovereignty must be in line with the European Green Deal's Farm to Fork strategy, which requires an adjustment of current food policies.

These were the main conclusions of the conference on EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers, organised by the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, with the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Minister for the Sea of the Regional Government of Galicia, on 26 September 2023 in the City of Culture of Galicia, Santiago de Compostela.

The president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, **Séamus Boland**, said that all Europeans, including producers, distributors and consumers, benefit from a fair, healthy, resilient and sustainable food chain. However, recent global crises have demonstrated the need for European food sovereignty with very high global security standards. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of collaboration: "The future of the food sector will depend on working together across actors, sectors and policy areas to effectively address and remedy the many challenges. We should aim for inclusive food policies and develop a long-term vision for the EU fishing sector." In his opinion, Europe's food sovereignty will be determined by the decisions of individuals, communities and organised civil society.

Read on to find out more about the specific proposals voiced at the conference by the Spanish Minister for Rural Affairs, **José González Vázquez** and other participants. You will also find out about the photographic exhibition Mariscadoras by the Galician artist Adrián Baúlde, organised by the Civil Society Organisations' Group in collaboration with the City of Culture of Galicia in the context of the conference. The exhibition paid tribute to shellfish gatherers and their role in the local food system. It complemented and supported the Committee's work on resilient and sustainable European food systems.

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



Connecting EU 2023: let's talk about elections

The EESC's flagship communication event, which brings together communication professionals from civil society organisations, will take place in Bratislava on 23 and 24 November. In the run-up to 2024, which could, as some say, be described as "the World Cup of elections", given the number of elections that will take place worldwide, Connecting EU will focus on the vote for the new European Parliament.

In particular, the seminar entitled **"European elections 2024. Why vote?"**, aims to give an impetus to civil society organisations to help promote the importance of EU elections and reach a high turnout against a backdrop of democratic backsliding in several Member States and a loss of faith in democratic institutions affecting all countries.

The seminar will specifically look at three topics, which may well dominate the debates in the months to come:

- **Disinformation and its impact on the 2024 elections:** It is safe to say that fake news and false narratives will be prolific in electoral campaigns for seats in the European Parliament. Now that AI is becoming the new frontier of disinformation, will it be even harder to crack down on it? Can the new EU rules on disinformation help stop the armies of social media trolls from spreading lies? Can they help curb foreign interference in the election? What can be done to counter the deluge of disinformation looming on the horizon?
- **Mobilising civil society around elections: what works and what doesn't:** With democracy on the back burner across Europe, is civil society ready to impart the importance of European elections to Europeans and convince them to turn out in great numbers? In the new communication landscape, with traditional media seemingly losing the upper hand, will the battle for voters' hearts and minds be won on social media or rather in person, at public gatherings? What are the do's and don'ts of communicating with prospective voters – we will look at recent elections to find out.
- **Elections and young people** – How can young people be convinced that their vote matters? How to ensure they cast their ballots en masse? With recent polls showing that more than half of Europeans younger than 25 feel abandoned by mainstream politics and the EU, what will it take to change their perception?

The seminar is part of the "Connecting EU" series, which every year offers a platform where press and communication professionals from civil society organisations can network and discuss current issues of common interest affecting Europe. It brings together EESC members and other EU representatives, partner organisations from Member States, journalists and researchers to debate the hot issues of the day.
The full programme and the list of speakers will be available shortly on the EESC's website. The event is by invitation only, but a few places are available for interested stakeholders. For more information, please write to: pressofficers@eesc.europa.eu.

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