EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

December 2023 | GA




# The Grassroots View - S4 Episode 3 - COP28: will Dubai provide much needed answers?

Welcome to the Grassroots View, the podcast of the European Economic and Social Committee. In this episode, we deep dive into the upcoming COP 28 in Dubai, where the world converges to address the pressing issue of climate change. Joining us are insightful voices: climate journalist **Anna Gumbau**, EESC Youth Delegate **Diandra Ní Bhuachalla**, Sustainable Public Affairs founder and CEO **Willem Vriesendorp** and **Jule Könneke** from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

We start with Anna Gumbau's perspective on the controversial choice of Dubai as the venue, diving into the challenges journalists face in covering such critical events. Diandra Ní Bhuachalla sheds light on the urgency of young people's voices in climate debates, and shares hopes for a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty. Willem Vriesendorp emphasises the need for businesses to lead in sustainability, while Jule Könneke explores the security dimensions of climate policy and the role of civil society. (tk)

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# EDITORIAL



## Editorial

Dear readers,

As we head towards the end of 2023, I would like to take a moment to pause and reflect on important milestones achieved by our Committee this year.

When I took up office in April, I committed to making the EESC a more inclusive and open platform, where Europeans, especially young people, can express their concerns and opinions. I am proud to say that the EESC has taken great strides and is now the first EU institution to introduce the EU Youth Test. This means that young people will be joining our opinion-making process to share their views on key topics for their future – virtual worlds, the economy and democracy. The EESC Youth Group will closely monitor these activities and spearhead youth initiatives in our house.

We have launched a call for an EU Blue Deal – a comprehensive water strategy for Europe. This is an issue that this house has collectively been pushing for to become a political priority for the next European Commission. I believe we have created momentum and we need to keep it going. With increasing droughts, floods and heatwaves, the EU Blue Deal comes at a crucial moment. Europe

urgently requires a standalone and cross-cutting approach on how to manage water, as there is no time to spare.

Europe is facing a new geopolitical context and, as President von der Leyen said, we need to answer the call of history. I strongly believe that EU candidate countries require concrete actions. The EESC is doing its part by leading the way and progressively integrating the EU candidate countries. We adopted an initiative on "Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs)". This means that civil society representatives from the EU candidate countries will join our advisory work as of 2024. I had the opportunity to speak to civil society from the Western Balkans region during our Civil Society Forum in Thessaloniki, and from Ukraine, during my latest visit to Kiev. My message was clear: the EESC is a credible partner that delivers on its commitments. I am convinced this is the right way forward.

These are just some of the key highlights of 2023, but let me reiterate that these milestones could not have been achieved without the collective effort of this house, our members and our staff. I would like to thank you for your determination and commitment to being the voice of civil society.

As we look forward to welcoming the New Year, we will also be welcoming the start of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. I would like to firstly thank our Spanish colleagues for their hard work and dedication throughout their presidency. I look forward to working together with the Belgian Presidency.

Wishing you a very festive period and looking forward to continuing this great work next year.

**Oliver Röpke**

**EESC President**

# DIARY DATES

**13-14 December 2023, Brussels**

EESC plenary session

**15 December 2023, Brussels**

How to foster the implementation of the Long-Term Vision for EU's Rural Areas?

**18 December 2023, Brussels**

The way ahead for the EU Economy in 2024

# TO THE POINT

**"To the point" welcomes Diandra Ní Bhuachalla, who will represent the European Economic and Social Committee as an EESC youth delegate to the COP summits in 2023 and 2024.**

**Diandra Ní Bhuachalla** is the EESC's Youth Delegate to COP28 and COP29. She is also a Future Generations Global Ambassador with the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and Foundations for Tomorrow, a member of UNESCO's SDG4 Youth & Student network, and a Common Futures Conversations Fellow with Chatham House. Diandra was Ireland's United Nations Youth Delegate from 2021-22, and she now works with the National Youth Council of Ireland, coordinating the United Nations and Climate Youth Delegate programmes respectively. Her advocacy spans 12 years at local, national, and international levels, focusing on gender equality, quality education, climate justice, and peace & security. Diandra holds a Bachelor of science in government (with honours), a Bachelor of law, and a Master of Science in International Public Policy & Diplomacy from University College Cork.

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## "IF THE RECENT CLIMATE DISASTERS ARE NOT ENOUGH FOR AGREEMENT AT COP28, WHAT WILL BE?"

**As a young delegate attending my first COP, I approach it with an open mind and a touch of naive optimism. Global temperatures rose to above 2 degrees pre-industrial levels this week. If this, along with the horrific floods, wildfires, droughts and earthquakes that we have witnessed this year alone all over the world, is not enough to reach an agreement on ending the use of fossil fuels, in line with the proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, I don't know what will be.**

It is very timely that our delegation's work will focus on Agriculture and Food Security, the Just Transition Work Programme, and Climate Financing. My own interests will add to these, which include Climate Justice, and the intersection of climate change with Gender Equality and Peace & Security.

Despite the limited access young people have to the negotiation rooms, I believe our voices do play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of COP28. I credit the relentless pressure exerted by young people on decisionmakers for the climate agreements we have today, even if they still fall short of what's really needed. I believe young voices are equally valid and should be heard, especially considering that we will face the brunt of climate inaction for the longest period of time.

My passion for climate action stems from three primary factors:

- The realisation that climate change is indiscriminate and exacerbates other issues like gender equality and peace and security.
- The abundance of information at our fingertips, empowering young people to educate themselves and become aware of the global impact of climate change.
- The frustration with the lack of climate action by decision-makers, prompting us to demand change.

At COP28, I eagerly anticipate meeting people from diverse backgrounds, hearing their stories, expanding my knowledge and rekindling my hope for the future. However, I remain apprehensive about the possibility that this excitement may turn into fear depending on the adequacy and implementation of the agreed-upon measures.

# “CEIST AMHÁIN DO...”




## One question to...

For our column "One question to...", we asked EESC member **Dovilė Juodkaitė** to talk about her recent report on the revision of the EU directive on the protection of the rights of victims of crimes.



## "Strengthen the rights of victims, provide them with support and protection across the EU"

**EESC Info: According to data from the European Commission, 15% of Europeans are victims of crime every year. Victims lack access to information, support and protection. What are the EESC's proposals on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime?**

**Dovilė Juodkaitė:** The proposed revision of the Victims' Rights Directive by the European Commission aims to enhance victims' rights, support and protection across the EU. It targets key rights crucial for safeguarding victims' rights throughout the legal process – access to information, individualised support, procedural rights and compensation. The EESC supports the proposal and focuses on specific provisions for improvement.

While there should be no hierarchy among victims and types of crimes, some victims may require additional support. The EESC welcomes amendments to improve individual victim assessment and supports specific measures for vulnerable victims, including children and people with disabilities.

Due to variations between Member States, the EESC suggests the Commission create detailed assessment guidelines for clarity on authorities' obligations, emphasising stronger obligations on training professionals on victims' rights and providing access to information. The EESC regrets the inclusion of mental health issues in the list of crimes and dangerous behaviour when assessing the offender's risk, advocating for its removal. Only factors linked to the dangerousness of a person should be included, so as not to continue discriminating against mental health issues.

The directive emphasises victims' ability to review court decisions independently, crucial for active justice participation. The EESC urges prompt notification of this right, expediting reviews. It also supports enhancing timely access to compensation by making the state advance payment in line with the compensation order and afterwards recuperating it from the offender.

Implementing the directive is crucial for consistent protection of victims' rights across the Union. The EESC urges Member States to allocate adequate funding for the transposition and implementation of the directive, emphasising the Commission's role in strengthening EU funding and aiding states with common standards and reporting formats for data collection. It suggests conducting studies and surveys on victims using a unified methodology and involving victim support services and civil society organisations in developing standards and formats.  Continuity of the work of the Victims' Rights Platform established within the framework of Victims' Rights Strategy 2020-2025 is important to guide and assist Member States in the transposition and implementation of the directive. Therefore, the EESC calls on the Commission to adopt the next term strategy, as well as Member States to adopt national strategies or programmes on victims' rights and to strengthen coordination and cooperation for cross-border cases.

The revision of the directive is a step in the right direction. By outlining where there is room for improvement, the EESC calls on the Commission and Member States to ensure that this revision ensures justice for all victims.

# TUGAIGÍ BUILLE FAOI THUAIRIM CÉN T-AOI ATÁ AGAINN...




## The surprise guest

**In the "Surprise guest" column of our newsletter, we invite extraordinary people from culture, politics, science, media and public life, whose work, commitment and dedication can inspire with their stories and testimonies.**

Our guest for December is **Willem Vriesendorp**, the founder and CEO of #SustainablePublicAffairs.  He shares his views on the COP 28 conference in Dubai held from 30 November-12 December this year and on the issue of climate change. Can such conferences contribute to changing the public's mindset on climate change, or will it make us more sensitive and attentive to climate change and its consequences for the planet? COP28 is the 28th annual United Nations climate meeting where governments will discuss how to limit climate change and how to prepare for climate change in the future.

Willem has been selected as one of the top Public Affairs consultants by Best in Brussels and Mace Magazine. This year, he was announced as one of Politico's Top 40 influencers in Brussels."

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## "The time for action is now"

**By Willem Vriesendorp**

**Sustainability can only be sustained if it is the fruit of a democratic process. The fact that, every year, the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) come together is positive. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is a much needed dialogue and it shows we believe in solving this, democratically.**

We see that an often-overlooked issue in the sustainability debate is time. I think it is safe to say that nobody is against environmental sustainability, but the differences lie in the level of ambition about the time required to get to certain thresholds and goals. The COP should be an accelerator of that process, but it can also have the opposite effect if it serves as a talking shop, focused on addressing the symptoms and not the root of the problem. Then it has a negative effect and amounts to greenwashing.

Looking towards COP28, we would like to see three things come out of it. First, a concrete action plan to halt investments in new fossil-powered energy and a fast phase-out of existing fossil powered energy sources. Second, an agreement on loss and damage. There is no doubt that the broadest shoulders should carry the heaviest loads, especially with the West having monetised public goods for private gain for centuries, so we need to have an agreement on loss and damage. That can only happen if the Global North agrees to pay up. Third, a profound revision of global capital markets and systems. We need to put a price on environmental externalities and pollution, so it becomes harder to finance polluting projects.

This COP will be particularly interesting because it will display the results of the first Global Stocktake and, needless to say, we are on a very bad trajectory. Last Saturday, for the first time in history, the average global temperature rose above +2°C warming. It was barely noticed. Immediate action is needed. This means that the COP28 presidency will have to play a role requiring extreme self-discipline and foresight, because what it must do is akin to the best hamburger shop in town advocating to prohibit the sale of hamburgers and advocating for a law that only allows plant-based hamburgers.

I cannot think of many examples of self-effacing leadership and behavioural scientists as that of Daniel Kahneman who tells us that such self-discipline and foresight is extremely rare and almost inhumane to muster.

This is why we need to create external pressure – and where civil society organisations are key. We also think that sustainable frontrunners, i.e., businesses that are already outperforming today's environmental norms, have a very big role to play. We need to make sure that they speak up and show negotiators that sustainability is a business case. Not only is it a business case that brings us closer to our climate and environmental targets – it is also good business.

At #SustainablePublicAffairs, this is exactly what we do, we are the first-of-its-kind public affairs agency that only works for cases which have a positive impact on the environment. Our mission is to make the performance of sustainable frontrunners the norm by advocating to raise the bar on environmental policy.

We invite the entire professional services industry to play a more positive, conscious role. Currently, most (strategy) consultancies, audit firms, law firms, communication advisors, PR advisors and the likes, put their hearts and minds to work on cases that go against the Paris Agreement. We believe that it is very important that these enabling industries take a stance and choose who they work for: no one should work as a "corporate person" to advance causes that they do not want to see happening as a "private person".

We believe that if sustainable frontrunners and the professional services industry speak up, the COP28 presidency will understand that sustainability is good business – the business of tomorrow. The time for action is now, and we should take as many of the measures needed as soon as possible. We have long passed the luxury of forecasting our way into the future. We need to start backcasting from where we want the world to be in 2050 – and that unfortunately means that we must frontload some of the more painful measures.

We can only do that united.

*This article was finalised while COP 28 was still on.*

# EESC NEWS




## Shaping sustainable finance: The EESC's blueprint for regulation governing ESG ratings

**The EESC has weighed in on the EU's proposal to regulate environmental, social and governance (ESG) ratings. In an opinion adopted in October 2023, the Committee emphasises the need for quality standards to combat greenwashing and advocates the mandatory inclusion of the principle of double materiality.**

The definitions of "ESG ratings" and "ESG rating providers" need to be refined to exclude certain non-commercial activities from the regulation's scope. The EESC also recommends establishing an EU

sustainability agency.

ESG ratings guide investments toward sustainable practices, aiding the shift to a climate-neutral economy. **Krzysztof Balon**, EESC rapporteur, welcomes the Commission's proposal, emphasising "the need for rigorous standards, transparency and conflict prevention to foster trust in financial markets and achieve a climate-neutral economy".

To ensure quality and combat greenwashing, the EESC proposes an authorisation process and organisational requirements for ESG rating providers. They suggest a "double materiality" standard, mandating companies to report on sustainability's impact on their business and society/environment. "This aims to enhance information reliability through regulated competition among providers", says EESC co-rapporteur **Andrea Mone**.

Additionally, the EESC suggests refining "ESG ratings" and excluding non-commercial evaluations by certain groups from regulation. The Committee advocates establishing an EU sustainability agency to fill market gaps by rating SMEs, service providers and social economy enterprises. This agency would restore public confidence in financial markets and facilitate dispute resolution, a priority for the EESC. (tk)

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## #ReskillEU – Europe's energy and transport workforce needs new skillset to make decarbonisation a reality

**The conference on #ReskillEU – new jobs for energy and transport in Europe, co-hosted by the TEN section and the European Commission's DG Research and Innovation in Brussels on 8 November 2023, sent a clear message: the EU must have a structured and efficient plan to develop the critical skills that are needed, if the energy and transport transitions are to happen.**

Clean energy and transport urgently need new skills, knowledge and capacities, and the EU's pathway towards net zero emissions by 2050 can only be successful if it goes hand in hand with a workforce equipped with the right skillset.

Referring to the importance of "new skills and knowledge for a smooth green and digital transition in the transport and energy sector," EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said: "A focus on the green and digital transition must not overlook the human element in achieving these goals. We need to make sure that all members of society are part of this transition."

To ensure that workers are equipped with the required "new" skills, the EU must act now, in line with the objectives set in the European Skills Agenda for 2025 and against the background of the European Year of Skills 2023.

The EU renewables sector currently needs over 1.2 million skilled workers and – according to the International Renewable Energy Agency – these figures are expected to increase annually until 2050.

The same goes for transport, which employs over 15 million people in the EU. Transport is a sector that is undergoing rapid transformation and being shaped a great deal by automation, electrification and greening technologies.

"When we look at the energy and transport sectors in Europe, the magnitude of the skills challenge becomes strikingly clear," pointed out **Baiba Miltoviča**, the TEN section president. "We must ensure that the development of knowledge and skills is at the forefront of our efforts. This entails a commitment to continuous learning, retraining and upskilling to meet the evolving demands." (mp)

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## #RareDiseases - The EU needs a strategy to help 36 million people in Europe

**At its conference in Bilbao on 10-11 October 2023, the EESC issued a strong plea urging the European Union to launch a European action plan to fight rare diseases.**

The main goal is to step up cooperation between national health systems to provide better diagnoses, treatment and care to patients with rare diseases.

Rare diseases pose a serious problem across all EU Member States;  the nascent European Health Union could play a key role in tackling them.

In practice, rare diseases are actually less rare than we might think. The figures are alarming: currently, there are over 7 000 rare diseases affecting 8% of the EU's population, approximately 36 million people.

Organised by the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN), the conference brought together 50 speakers, 45 EESC members, the European Commission's Director General for Health and Food Safety, 3 Members of the European Parliament and around 550 participants from all over Europe.

"The European Health Union we are building must protect and care for every citizen. We have a duty to support people living with rare diseases and their families. Our efforts will continue to make a difference to all those in need," said **Stella Kyriakides**, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

"The fact is that "rare diseases" are not rare at all. It is a pan-European challenge that requires a pan-European solution," echoed **Oliver Röpke**, EESC president, while **Baiba Miltoviča**, TEN section president, added: "We need a European action plan to allow patients with rare diseases to be treated in the most suitable EU Member State: they deserve the best care, no matter where it is available in Europe." (mp)

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## Shaping our climate future in COP28: The EESC delegation

**COP28 provides a crucial juncture for nations to reaffirm and beef up their commitments to combat climate change. The Paris Agreement, established during COP21, set the stage for collective efforts to limit global temperature rise. In COP28, countries have the chance to revisit and strengthen their climate targets, ensuring that they align with the latest scientific assessments and the ever-increasing urgency of the climate crisis.**

The COP28 conference convenes from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The EESC is actively participating in the annual negotiations.

At COP28, the first Global Stocktake of the implementation of the Paris Agreement will conclude. Each stocktake is a two-year process, carried out every five years, to assess the world's collective progress towards achieving its climate goals. The first Global Stocktake is at the mid-point of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs, including Goal 13 (climate action).

In a letter to parties sent in July 2023, the presidency announced that COP 28 will focus on four paradigm shifts:

- Fast-tracking the energy transition and slashing emissions before 2030;
- Transforming climate finance by delivering on old promises and setting the framework for a new deal on finance;
- Putting nature, people, lives and livelihoods at the heart of climate action; and
- Mobilising for the most inclusive COP ever.

The EESC will be part of the EU delegation and will count on the participation of EESC President, **Oliver Röpke**, the six members of the Ad Hoc Group on COP, **Peter Schmidt**, **Isabel Caño Aguilar**, **Josep Puxeu Rocamora**, **Antje Sabine Gerstein**, **Neža Repanšek** and **Arnaud Schwartz** plus the EESC youth delegate to the UNFCCC **Diandra NÍ Bhuachalla**. (ks)

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## Assessing SDGs progress: a call for action

**In a world striving for sustainable progress, it is evident that significant challenges loom large halfway through the timeline of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In its opinion adopted in the October plenary, the EESC stresses the need for the European Union to adopt an integrated and comprehensive strategy with ambitious, long-term goals and plans.**

A recent UN report reveals alarming trends, indicating that only 12% of around 140 SDG targets are on track globally. The EESC urges for a lasting political commitment from the EU involving early stakeholder engagement and sufficient resources. The committee stresses that SDGs should remain a commitment beyond 2030.

The EESC underscores the importance of a long-term political commitment from the Commission, extending beyond the current term of office. This commitment should include early stakeholder involvement, representation from other institutions and adequate resources to ensure inclusive civil society organisation participation. The EESC firmly believes that the SDGs must remain a long-term commitment, even beyond 2030.

**Maria Nikolopoulou**, the rapporteur of the opinion said: "We urge the Commission to keep SDG implementation high on the political agenda, even beyond 2030, and put the means to prepare an EU overarching strategy for the next mandate into place".

To accelerate progress, the EESC recommends shifting from a siloed to a holistic approach, simplifying policies for sustainable development. Engaging diverse sectors, including civil society, public and private sectors, academia, and youth and women's organisations, is crucial. The EESC advocates for a structured civil society dialogue involving companies, trade unions and organisations on the ground.

"SDGs are still perfectly relevant today. We should continue to work on them together", said co-rapporteur **Antje Gerstein**. (ks)

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## Never before have the Western Balkans been so close to EU accession

**The EESC held its 9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum on 19-20 October 2023, signalling a renewed momentum for the region to join the EU, in view of the current geopolitical situation, and a clear commitment by EU leaders to the enlargement policy.**

Representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) stressed the need for greater support and safeguarding of civic space to facilitate the essential socio-economic reforms required for EU integration.

The forum was organised in cooperation with the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, the Regional Cooperation Council and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Opening the forum, EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said: "The EESC has been an integral part in the EU's enlargement process and I am proud to see that we are taking our support a step further. Only a few weeks ago, the EESC took a historic decision to open our doors to the EU candidate countries by appointing enlargement candidate members".

Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, **Dubravka Šuica** said: "I would like to say to the countries of the Western Balkans that our present and our future are intimately connected. I welcome the EESC's initiative on enlargement candidate members to include them in your advisory work. The EESC is the first of the European Union bodies to do this".

The speakers, who came from various CSOs and NGOs across all countries in the Western Balkans, mentioned the challenges that civil society organisations are facing, such as sporadic consultations, notable decline in cooperation with governments and limited involvement in the monitoring and implementation process of the European policies.

The forum discussed the state of the education system, youth policy and skills development in the Western Balkans, including adult education, lifelong learning and vocational education and training.

The third session was dedicated to civil society's contribution to the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

The Declaration adopted will be a step towards the EU-Western Balkans Summit in December. (at)

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## Water: can we afford to do nothing? EESC presents EU Blue Deal Action Plan

**On 26 October, the European Economic and Social Committee unveiled its plan for a comprehensive EU water strategy. The EESC is leading the way as the first European institution to take concrete steps to address the water crisis. Its proposals include: water consumption labels, a Blue Transition Fund, water conditionality in EU fund and a dedicated EU Commissioner for water.**

The cost of inaction on water is estimated to be up to five times higher than taking action, putting businesses at a significant financial disadvantage. Europe has a unique opportunity to turn water challenges into opportunities for technological development, societal progress and business growth. However, the current fragmented approach is inadequate in addressing water scarcity, pollution, and climate change.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** presented a political declaration with a set of principles and concrete actions to make the Blue Deal a reality. "Water is THE priority", Röpke said, "We need to learn from the mistakes that have been made with climate, energy and critical raw materials, and adopt a standalone water strategy that's on an equal footing with the EU Green Deal."

Member of the European Parliament, **Pernille Weiss**, endorsed the call for action, highlighting the necessity of true water resilience in the EU. **Virginijus Sinkevičius**, European Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, commended the EESC's water initiative, placing freshwater management in the European spotlight.

The EESC aims to intensify pressure on EU institutions and Member States for an integrated water strategy ahead of the European Commission's Water Resilience initiative in 2024. It will also work on additional opinions examining specific aspects of the Blue Deal.

**Mariana Mazzucato**, co-chair of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, warned that neglecting the water crisis hinders progress on climate change and Sustainable Development Goals. UN Special Rapporteur **Pedro Arrojo-Agud**o emphasised water as a common good, requiring democratic governance based on sustainability and human rights.

The Committee stresses the EU's role in addressing the global water crisis, with plans to advocate for international action on water-related issues at COP28 in December. (gb)

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## Civil society under pressure in Europe – Insights from the latest rule of law report

**A new report from the Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (FRRL) Group of the EESC highlights the growing challenges civil society organisations face in Europe. The report was unveiled on 7 November during the FRRL Group's conference on the current state of the rule of law and its impact on civic space.**

The fourth annual EESC conference on fundamental rights and the rule of law examined the emerging trends and challenges, and civil society's indispensable role in overseeing and upholding the rule of law based on the FRRL Group report and on the European Commission's 2023 Rule of Law Report.

President **Oliver Röpke** emphasised the centrality of defending freedom, democracy and human rights, and proposed the establishment of a Civil Society Forum on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law. European Commissioner for Justice, **Didier Reynders**, mentioned the vital role of civil society in upholding the rule of law, calling for its protection, support and empowerment.

The Commission's 4th Rule of Law Report was adopted in July 2023. Like the 2022 report, it contains country-specific recommendations for each Member State. This year's report also assesses the progress made in implementing recommendations from the previous year, roughly two-thirds of which have been fully or partially addressed, according to the Commission.

During the conference, the EESC FRRL Group released its report based on country visits to Greece, Finland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden in 2022. The report reveals that no Member State is exempt from challenges, and identifies trends and pressing threats to fundamental rights and the rule of law in Europe. These challenges include obstacles encountered by civil society organisations in securing funding, evolving socioeconomic changes in the media sector and persistent issues related to the speed of justice – all of which are evident across various European countries.

**Paul Soete**, President of the FRRL Group, calls for stronger support at national and EU levels to safeguard civic space and democracy as a whole. (gb)

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## EESC attends UN Committee on World Food Security

EESC members **Peter Schmidt**, **Andreas Thurner**, **Piroska Kállay** and **Maurizio Reale** attended the 51st plenary of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in Rome. World food security is a critical global concern that transcends borders, impacting the well-being of billions of people and the stability of nations. As the global population continues to grow, and climate change poses unprecedented challenges to agriculture, ensuring food security has become an urgent priority.

The EESC called for a European Food Policy Council to ensure a participatory approach to policy making and urged participants to take the necessary measures to control food speculation. (ks)

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## Pharmaceutical package: the EU needs to be more strategic

**The long-awaited updating of EU pharma legislation offers potential benefits for Europeans, but should give more consideration to strategic autonomy**

The proposed revamp of the EU regulation on the pharmaceuticals sector is welcome, says the EESC, but it should put greater emphasis on broader social and geopolitical concerns in addition to ensuring that the industry remains competitive and attracts investment.

"We need to achieve strategic autonomy and for that we need security of supply. Administrative and financial incentives have to be developed," says **Martin Schaffenrath**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the Commission's proposal. "We need investment in this sector. We need sustainable support for this area. And we need to bring back production."

The pharmaceutical industry is a key economic player in the EU, employing 840 000 people directly and three times as many indirectly. In 2021, the industry invested EUR 41 billion in research and innovation. The opinion makes it clear that supporting the sector as a high-tech cornerstone of the EU economy should be at the heart of the Union's long-term approach.

To reduce dependence on third countries, the EESC supports incentives for EU drug manufacturers and advocates relocating production from non-EU nations. It also proposes the establishment of a European contingency reserve of medicines of strategic importance. Stressing equitable strategic autonomy, the EESC recommends expanding joint EU medicine purchases, citing the successful COVID-19 vaccine procurement example.

Focusing on the social importance of regulatory revision, the opinion proposes a special EU-level fund for rare diseases, ensuring treatment access for all European patients and mitigating healthcare disparities among Member States, especially when statutory health insurance falls short of covering entire treatment costs. (dm)

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## Modern business responsibility can enable companies to drive transition

**Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) need more effective, better structured support to transition to sustainable business practices**

In an own-initiative opinion, the EESC focuses on the concept of modern business responsibility, the role of MSMEs in promoting its principles and the need for lawmakers to create an enabling environment for MSMEs to fully embrace those principles.

The EESC defines modern business responsibility as a proactive, voluntary approach encompassing economic, social, and environmental sustainability, surpassing legal obligations. The opinion highlights challenges that MSMEs face in their efforts to adopt these practices. To address this, the EESC recommends establishing MSME alliances, fostering skills and competences crucial for this transition. Collaboration between employers' organisations, trade unions, professional chambers, associations and civil society is essential to collectively tackle these challenges.

Emphasising a broad and pragmatic approach, the EESC recognises the diverse nature of MSMEs and rejects a one-size-fits-all solution. Rapporteurs **Ferre Wyckmans** and **Milena Angelova** stress the need for proactive thinking, requiring support from social partners and policymakers.

The EESC advocates for a supportive policy framework that avoids complexity, ensuring that resources concentrate on grassroots-level business responsibility. The opinion recommends developing practical tools such as checklists, templates and calculators, and alternative-scenario analyses that MSMEs can use to develop their operations in line with modern business responsibility, and to report on their commitments and achievements.

Rapporteur **Rudolf Kolbe** insists on integrating responsibility into all business processes, extending the concept to self-employed workers, and emphasises continuous professional development.

The committee makes it clear that the concept of business responsibility also evolves with time, ensuring the proactive and forward-looking management of long-term digital, green and demographic developments while strengthening resilience during crises. (dm)

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## National Recovery and Resilience Plans: social investment on the rise, but much still to be improved

**The EESC hosted a conference in Brussels on 8 November, focusing on the social dimension within the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the EU's largest financial instrument.**

The RRF aims to promote social cohesion and mitigate the pandemic's social impact. However, shortcomings in the NRRPs persist, including uneven investment in social programmes across Member States, inadequate consultation with social partners and a weak gender dimension.

EESC President, **Oliver Röpke**, emphasised the need for new measures to address imbalances in EU-funded social programmes, particularly in housing, training and education. **Evelyn Regner**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, highlighted the uneven social dimension in NRRPs, stressing the effectiveness of the milestones mechanism in countries with strong social partner involvement.

**Nicolas Schmit**, EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, called for unallocated RRF funds to be considered for investment in housing, noting that while the RRF has increased the capacity for social investment in the EU, Member States face housing problems that need urgent attention.

Participants in the conference criticised the inadequacy of gender provisions in the RRF, falling short of EU commitments to gender equality. While acknowledging ongoing projects in some Member States that could enhance gender equality in the long term, the debate underscored the need for a more robust and comprehensive approach to address the social and gender dimensions in the NRRPs.

The conference addressed various aspects of these plans, including social cohesion and the youth dimension, with a particular focus on educational measures in NRRP programmes aimed at young people. Participants underscored the need for more comprehensive strategies to facilitate the transition from education to the workplace, and emphasised the importance of providing young people with a platform to actively engage in decisions that shape their future. (ll)

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## Gender equality still progressing at a snail's pace in the EU

**Despite many recent breakthroughs, and the fact that the EU gender equality index reached record levels this year, much still needs to be done for women to achieve equal rights with men in many domains.**

On 25 October, the EESC held a debate on gender equality as part of European Gender Equality Week – an annual event organised by the Parliament aimed at highlighting the EU's continuous efforts to put women at the centre of legislation.

Although progress is being made, it is far from satisfactory. In 2023, the EU gender equality index registered the highest annual increase ever, bringing the EU score to 70.2 points, as reported this week by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

Vice President of the European Parliament, **Evelyn Regner**, pointed out the continued segregation in the labour market, with women concentrated in lower-paying sectors and men in higher-paying ones. She stressed the urgency of tackling gender inequalities, especially in equal job opportunities. Commissioner for Equality, **Helena Dalli**, highlighted the EU's efforts over the last four years to protect women's rights, including proposed legislation on pay discrimination and women's representation on company boards.

EESC President, **Oliver Röpke**, reaffirmed the Committee's commitment to mainstreaming gender equality across all policy work, and encouraged female leadership within the EESC. The EESC will once again take part in European Gender Equality Week, and organise debates on the impact of the climate crisis on gender equality, violence against women and gender inequality in access to financial markets. (ll)

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## Connecting EU 2023: Disinformation and lack of interest are the main reasons for poor voter turnout in European elections

**The impact of disinformation on the 2024 European Parliament elections and ways to ensure civil society plays a more effective role in promoting those elections, with a strong focus on young people: these were the main topics discussed at the seminar "European Elections 2024: Why vote?", organised by the EESC in Bratislava on 23-24 November.**

The event was hosted by the European Labour Authority and held in partnership with the Slovak Economic and Social Council and with the support of the Liaison Office of the European Parliament in Bratislava. It brought together more than 130 people: EESC members, communication and press officers from civil society organisations, journalists and representatives of economic and social councils from seven Member States.

Discussions spanning over two days revealed that Europeans need to know how EU decisions affect their lives if campaigns to boost voter turnout are to have any real effect. Messages need to be tailored to each EU country and barriers preventing young people from entering politics need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

To encourage voters to turn out in force, it is crucial to effectively combat disinformation and to encourage strong and clear communication about what is at stake, making voters feel the commitment of politicians who will represent them in the EU.

Opening the seminar, EESC president **Oliver Ropke** said: "If we want the 2024 elections to be successful, then all of us – the EU institutions, the media, communication specialists – need to work together to raise awareness in order to fight disinformation and, most importantly, to bring Europe closer to its people.  Above all, they need to know that these elections are about them."

Mr Röpke and the EESC delegation also visited the Jan Kuciak Investigative centre and paid tribute to journalist Jan Kuciak who was murdered in 2018 for exposing high-level corruption in his country. (ll)

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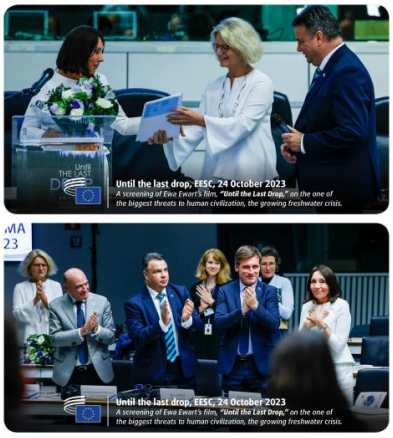


## Film screening "Until the last drop" with Polish film director Ewa Ewart

**The European Economic and Social Committee held a screening of the film "Until the last drop," about the growing freshwater crisis, in the presence of Polish film director Ewa Ewart. The screening, was part of a series of EESC events on the topic of water, culminating in the conference "Call for an EU Blue Deal", where the Committee unveiled its water strategy for the EU.**

"Water is life, let us protect and care for it. No water, no life on this planet", said **Ewa Ewart** introducing the screening of her documentary on water on 24 October in Brussels.

The event was opened by EESC President **Oliver Röpke**, with the participation of Vice President **Laurențiu Plosceanu** and member **Pietro De Lotto,** who spearheaded the EESC Blue Deal Initiative. Over 100 guests attended the screeening, including EESC members, EU representatives and journalists.

Ewa Ewart's films deal with difficult issues and dangerous subjects. She has depicted stories on the borderline between life and death. Her films talk of people and wars. "Until the last drop" is also about war, she says: "It tells the story of a different war, the stupidest of all. It is a story about the war man declared on water – a source of life – in the name of progress. And the hope we can find where we are concentrating on our rivers – the primary source of fresh, clean water we need to exist. Every day, more and more people are becoming aware that we do not have much time before it is too late to change how we manage water – our most precious resource". (ehp)

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## EESC celebrates its 65th anniversary

**To celebrate its 65th anniversary, the EESC will organise a debate, hosting distinguished guest speakers and high-level representatives.**

The debate "EESC@65: Empowering Civil Society, Defending Democracy" will take place on Wednesday 13 December 2023, during the EESC's plenary session at 17:30 and can be followed via web stream on the EESC's official website.

# NEWS FROM THE GROUPS




## What Europe's SMEs need

**By Stefano Mallia (President of the EESC Employers' Group), Gerardo Cuerva (President of CEPYME) and Petri Salminen (President of SMEunited)**

Over the last few years, Europe's micro, small and medum-sized enterprises (MSMEs) have faced the biggest global crises since the Second World War, but have nevertheless shown resilience. Europe cannot afford to allow its SMEs to fail to cope with the ongoing transformations. We have outlined the main challenges for Europe's SMEs below.

The regulatory avalanche is weighing down on SMEs. This is why we are calling for the EU to follow up on the SME Relief Package commitment to put measures in place to ensure that legislation takes into account the needs and specific features of small businesses.

Another major challenge for European SMEs is access to skills. European SMEs face enormous problems in recruiting staff due to demographic change. Action must be taken to implement measures in all areas.

Facilitating access to finance is a third challenge for the coming years. Addressing this challenge means facilitating European SMEs' access to alternative systems of finance and markets and establishing regulations that encourage investment in small businesses, as well as combating the scourge of late payments.

Facilitating the digital and green transitions for businesses is a huge challenge and cannot be undertaken without European SMEs. For this reason, the EU institutions must involve SMEs in these processes and encourage them to play a leading role.

We are also calling for undertaking a reassessment of where we stand on reaching the targets set by the Green Deal. We feel that such an exercise is required to ensure that the targets set are indeed achievable and, where they are not, to engage in discussions with private enterprises to set new targets with realistic timeframes.

None of the above will be possible without a stable economic framework that creates certainty. As economic and trade balances continue to shift, and Europe faces serious competitiveness challenges, we must create a Single Market which allows SMEs to reach their full potential.

Read the full article HERE.



## Sustainable competitiveness: a workers' perspective

**By the EESC Workers' Group**

**Sustainable competitiveness might sound like the latest Brussels buzzword. However, this is far from the truth. Competitiveness is generally seen as the flagship of employers, arguing for favourable business environments where companies can thrive. Needless to say, thriving companies are a goal that workers very much share.**

Where does the sustainable part come in then? A competitive edge can be obtained in many different ways. A company can be more efficient, can innovate in its production methods, help develop better technology, train and improve the conditions of staff. Or, it could outcompete its rivals by exploiting gaps in legislation, polluting the environment, or finding ways of paying less to its employees – you might have heard of the platform economy.

Sustainable competitiveness is therefore a key priority for workers and citizens at large: it ensures that competitiveness is a process that improves society, rather than a race to the bottom. It is better for everyone in the long run, as everyone has – so far – the need for a planet. And it is in the interest of employers, too: not only does it helps them have environmental and social stability, it also encourages fair competition and respects the work of honest companies.

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## EU Green Deal: Maroš Šef?ovi?'s first green dialogue takes place at the EESC

**By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group**

**Maroš Šefčovič, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, chose our conference Empowering consumers on climate change for the first of his "Green Dialogues", which he announced during his hearing before the European Parliament's committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food safety for the post of European Commissioner for the Green Deal in October.**

The conference organised by the Civil Society Organisations' Group was attended by around 140 people, including national and European representatives of civil society organisations and European policymakers. The event included the launch of an EESC-commissioned study on The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU. It also highlighted the role of consumers and the need for an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable and inclusive green transition, requiring targeted policies and cooperation among all stakeholders.

Opening the event, **Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said that the Group had welcomed Mr Šefčovič's announcement of green dialogues. "You have honoured us by selecting our conference for your first green dialogue."

Mr **Šefčovič** said that he plans to hold green dialogues on a regular basis to cultivate and strengthen public support for the European Green Deal. "We want to show that we not only have the legal solutions, but we also listen and care, and are always ready to work with stakeholders to find balanced solutions. These solutions will help us tackle climate change, be socially responsible and help create high-quality jobs in Europe. Your Committee, with your group, is an excellent forum for these dialogues."

Read on to find out more about the debates. The conclusions and recommendations from the conference are available on the EESC website.

# SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS




## 6-9 June 2024 European Elections. I am voting. Are you?

**We are introducing a new column in our EESC info: "I am voting. Are you?" featuring from December 2023 to June 2024, with the views of our guest speakers on how and why to participate in the European elections. Our first guest is Robert Sermek, head of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia.**

Leading a team of seven people, Robert Sermek is responsible for implementing the Parliament's communication strategies at national level and for bringing the work of the Parliament and its members closer to Slovak citizens. He has been working in the European Parliament since 2007. He was project leader for audio-visual products in the EU-wide communication campaigns before the 2014 and 2019 European elections, and editorial coordinator for the Parliament's audio-visual services. Before joining the EU administration, he worked as a journalist and was a correspondent for the Slovak News Agency TASR and later for Slovak Radio in Brussels, covering a crucial period of Slovakia's accession talks with the EU and NATO.



## "Why you shouldn't miss voting in the 2024 European elections"

**By Robert Sermek**

**Next year, between 6 and 9 June, more than 400 million EU citizens will get a chance to elect Members of the European Parliament and shape the future of the European Union. However, this unique democratic exercise is often presented as less relevant and less important.**

Recently I had the privilege of attending a communications seminar dedicated to the European Elections 2024, organised by the European Economic and Social Committee. It took place in Bratislava, Slovakia, and the choice of venue was not random. Slovakia is a country with the lowest voter turnout among all Member States.

The seminar tried to find an answer to a very simple question: Why vote in the European Elections? I would start with a counter question: And why not? Voting is always important, be it on local, national, or European level. It is an excellent opportunity to have our say on topics we care about.

In June 2024, we will be selecting 720 Members of the European Parliament, or MEPs. These 720 politicians will be co-deciding on EU legislation for the next five years. On EU legislation that has a direct impact on our daily lives in virtually all areas, from the environment, security and migration, to consumer rights and the economy. Not everyone necessarily agrees with every decision taken at EU level, but these decisions have a real impact on our lives. Understanding the impact helps clarify the importance of voting and having a say, and that not voting means that we actually let someone else decide for us.

Another element of the European elections, which is often underestimated, is its impact on the future overall direction of the EU and the composition of its institutions.

Following the June elections, the Heads of States and Governments will have to nominate the next Commission President. In doing so, they must respect the election result and nominate a candidate from the victorious political party. The newly composed Parliament will then elect the Commission President, and this is not something that can be taken for granted. In 2019, Ursula von den Leyen was elected by a rather tiny majority. In addition, the MEPs will grill each candidate for the Commissioner post in a three-hour long public hearing before electing the full college of Commissioners in the autumn of 2024. Thus, the impact of our vote on the future shape of the EU institutions is evident, and much larger than just the composition of the European Parliament.

But how can we convince our citizens? The European Parliament's communication services have been "campaigning" since the beginning of 2023. The first phase of our communication campaign, politically neutral and impartial, was dedicated to the "delivery": what the EU has done for its citizens and what impact it has had on their lives in the past four years. We will slowly move to the "democracy" narrative in the coming weeks, stressing the importance of voting.

Obviously, the European Parliament cannot and will not make it alone. We are working with our volunteers and active citizens signed up in our together.eu community, and I invite all of you to get familiar with this initiative and register. You can sign-up as individual or as a civil society organisation.

We need as many partners as possible, including the European Economic and Social Committee. We need civil society organisations, trade unions, social interest groups, business associations. All together you represent, or can reach, more than 90 million Europeans – and that is a massive voting power. I sincerely believe that our pre-election messages can reach these voters thanks to your help and cooperation.


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EESC info is published nine times a year during EESC plenary sessions. EESC info is available in 23 languages
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11/2023