



# Section for External Relations



*European Economic and Social Committee*

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EU'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

In recent years, the international relations of the European Union have opened up to new actors from civil society, and the international agreements signed by the EU include arrangements on an almost systematic basis aiming to establish dialogue at civil society level. In its capacity as institutional representative of European organised civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee's role is therefore evolving. Nevertheless, its core task remains that of supporting the EU's external activities by conducting a dialogue with the civil society organisations of the non-EU countries and geographical groupings with which the EU has formal relations.

## THE SECTION FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The Section for External Relations comprises 135 members. It is led by a president, three vice presidents and a 12 member bureau.

The principal areas of activity of the Section for External Relations (REX) include monitoring relations between the European Union and the countries and regions with which the EU has formal relations, and developing relations with civil society in these countries and regions, particularly in the candidate countries. The Section is also active on trade, development and human rights issues.

At the request of the political authorities or on the basis of international treaties, the Section has established close relations with the economic and social partners and other civil society organisations in third countries. Specific delegations have been set up within the Section to carry out this task. The aim is to discuss primarily economic and social issues and to promote a stronger civil society. Joint declarations are adopted in this connection, which are addressed to the political authorities.

The Section's consultative work involves own-initiative opinions, but increasingly exploratory opinions are drafted at the request of the European institutions. During the drafting process, the Section works closely with the European institutions, representatives of European civil society organisations which are not represented within the Section and representatives of civil society in third countries.

## THE SECTION AND ITS EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURS

The Section's external activities relating to the countries neighbouring Europe are organised on several fronts:

### • The enlargement process

The Section is currently involved in the enlargement process for Iceland, Turkey and the Western Balkan countries pursuant to the various association treaties in force. Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, comprising EESC members and representatives of the civil society of the countries concerned, have been set up and meet twice a year to discuss developments in the accession negotiations or the integration process and to adopt recommendations for the political authorities. The JCCs also play an important role in the dissemination of information on the EU among the citizens of the candidate and potential candidate countries.

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### • Eastern neighbours and relations with Russia

The eastern dimension of the European neighbourhood policy (ENP) is monitored by the Eastern Neighbours Contact Group. The aim of this group is to develop close contacts with civil society organisations from Europe's eastern neighbours (Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus and the Caucasian countries) and to facilitate their development. A number of opinions have been adopted on neighbouring countries, with particular emphasis on civil society involvement in the framing and implementing of the national action plans for the ENP.

The EESC is an active member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, where it promotes the participation of social partners and other economic and social organisations.

The Section also monitors relations between the European Union and Russia. Working relations have been established with the Russian Civic Chamber on the basis of a memorandum of understanding, and regular contacts are held with NGOs, trade unions and academics. The EU Russia Contact Group coordinates these activities.

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Conference in the framework of Eastern Partnership on «Towards a European Community of Democracy, Prosperity and a Stronger Civil Society», Warsaw, September 2011

## • The Western Balkans

The EESC has set up a contact group responsible for fostering its activities with the civil society organisations of the Western Balkans. A Western Balkan civil society forum has met every two years since 2006. It brings together civil society representatives from the region and from across the EU to discuss common issues. The participants adopt conclusions which are subsequently addressed to the political authorities of the EU and the region. The Section has also drafted opinions on most of the countries in that region and endeavours to establish or consolidate economic and social councils in the countries concerned. Joint Consultative Committees are set up in line with the stabilisation and association agreements signed with countries in the region.

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## • Relations with the European Free Trade Association-European Economic Area

Comprising representatives of the EFTA Consultative Committee from the EEA on the one hand and EESC members on the other, the EEA CC meets once a year to look at questions of shared interest and put forward joint recommendations to the EU and EEA authorities.

## THE SECTION AND THE EUROMED REGION

The 1995 Ministerial Declaration of Barcelona called on the EESC to establish links with its counterparts and equivalent bodies in the Mediterranean. Firm in the belief that the participation of economic and social actors and other representatives of organised civil society is vital for the worldwide success of this policy, and all the more so after the events of the «Arab spring», the Section and its Euromed follow-up committee have thrown themselves into this initiative.

The Section supports the organisation of the annual Euro-Mediterranean Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions. At these summits, recommendations are adopted and forwarded to the political authorities. EESC members present these recommendations at the Euromed Ministerial Conferences, before the Euromed Parliamentary Assembly (where the EESC has the status of observer) and the European Commission. The ESCs of the relevant countries will set up an Assembly of ESCs and similar institutions within the Union for the Mediterranean.

The Section has also drafted a number of opinions on European neighbourhood policy in the region. In close coordination with its partners from the southern countries, the Section focuses particularly on monitoring the involvement of civil society in framing and implementing the national action plans.

One of the Section's key objectives is to contribute to the consolidation and setting-up of national economic and social councils in this region. Thus, in recent years, Jordanian and Moroccan councils have been set up and steps have been taken to promote the establishment of an ESC in Tunisia and the Palestinian Territories.

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REX section members meeting Mr Slim Amanou, Tunisian Secretary of State for Youth and Sports and former blogger and activist, Tunis, April 2011

## THE SECTION AND THE AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN AND PACIFIC COUNTRIES (ACP)

The Cotonou Agreement acknowledges the potentially vital role of non-State actors in the ACP countries' development process and empowers the EESC to organise consultation sessions and meetings of the EU-ACP economic and social interest groups.

On this basis, the Section and its EU-ACP follow-up committee have regular contacts with the civil society representatives of the ACP countries. These contacts principally take the form of:

- regional seminars;
- general meetings held in Brussels every three years with representatives of all the ACP countries.



One of the Section's objectives is to provide information on the Cotonou Agreement and, through close cooperation with the ACP partners, to monitor its implementation and in particular the involvement of civil society. This activity is carried out in partnership with the European Commission.

In recent years, the Section, with its ACP partners, has also monitored negotiations on the economic partnership agreements (EPAs). The EESC has drawn up recommendations urging the integration of the social and environmental dimensions into these agreements and the establishment of follow-up mechanisms at civil society level. In this connection, initiatives have been taken to promote the setting-up of networks of ACP economic and social actors at regional level, starting with the Caribbean civil society in the framework of the EC-Cariforum EPA.

The Section also attends the meetings of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (where the EESC has the status of observer) and the annual meetings of the ACP-EC Council of Ministers.

The Section also drafts opinions on development policy in general at the request of the European Commission or on its own initiative. Lastly, at the European Commission's request, it also makes contributions to the EU-Africa strategy by supporting the work of the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council.

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## THE SECTION AND ASIA

In Asia, the EESC has established formal relations with India, China and Japan. Opinions have also been adopted and contacts forged with other countries and regions: South Korea, Central Asia and ASEAN.

### • India

The Section has drawn up several opinions on EU-India relations and its members contribute to the framing and implementation, by the European Commission, of the EU-India Action Plan. Furthermore, the EESC is closely following the negotiations on the free trade agreement between the EU and India. In this way, it helps pave the way towards better mutual understanding between civil society on each side.

### • China

The Section has drawn up a number of opinions on relations with China. The EESC has also established relations with the Chinese Economic and Social Council (CESC), with which it has signed a joint declaration. The EU-China Summit of September 2006 acknowledged that exchanges and cooperation between the EESC and the CESC constituted a part of the EU-China relationship, and called for the establishment of a regular round table. This round table was set up and has met twice a year since then, forwarding its recommendations to the political authorities of the European Union and China.

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9<sup>th</sup> meeting of the EU-China Round Table, Xi'an, May 2011

## THE SECTION AND LATIN AMERICA

The Section has regular contacts with civil society representatives of the countries of Latin America.

The EESC also adopts opinions on relations between the European Union and the various regions of the continent and on topics of major importance, such as social cohesion, regional integration and trade relations.

At the request of the European Commission, since 1999 the Section has been organising meetings between the organised civil society of Europe and Latin America. At these meetings, recommendations are adopted which are then presented by the EESC president to the EU Latin America Summits. Furthermore, members of the Latin America Follow-Up Committee attend the meetings of the Euro-Latin America Parliamentary Assembly (where the EESC has the status of observer).

The Section has developed formal relations with the Mercosur Consultative Forum, the Andean Community's advisory councils and the Consultative Committee of the Central American Integration System. These relations have been enhanced by the joint monitoring of the Association Agreements negotiated by the EU with these regions.

### • Relations with Brazil

Mandated by the EU-Brazil Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 2008, and following the creation of a Strategic Partnership between the EU and Brazil, a civil society round table between the EESC and the Brazilian Council for Economic and Social Development (CDES) was created, holding its first meeting in 2009. The round table meets twice per year and presents its conclusions to the annual EU Brazil Summit.

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A delegation of the EESC, led by President Dimitriadis, meets Mr Lula da Silva, President of Brazil, Brasilia, June 2007

## THE SECTION AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Section has set up a permanent study group on international trade to monitor multilateral trade negotiations and voice the EESC's position before each ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization. Section members also attend these conferences, as part of the delegation of the European Community, as civil society advisers.

Taking into account developments in the European Union's trade policy, the Section, in close contact with its third-country partners, also monitors trade negotiations between the European Union and a number of countries and regions, in order to put forward civil society's point of view on issues such as sustainable development, labour and environmental standards and civil society participation in implementing trade agreements. The EESC's participation in formally established joint civil society bodies under trade agreements, as well as its involvement in sustainability impact assessments, are two important priorities for the Section in the area of trade.

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## THE SECTION AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Under the patronage of the EESC president, the Section maintains working relations with several international organisations, in particular, with the International Labour Organization, the United Nations' ECOSOC and the World Trade Organization.

Furthermore, the Section is involved in the work of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS), the Union of African ESCs (UCESA) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC).

## THE SECTION'S WORK ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT IN EU POLICIES

The Section has set up a permanent working group of nine members on the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). It analyses the relationship established between civil society in third countries and the European Union: is civil society considered as a real partner of the EU? is it only a potential beneficiary of EU support? are economic, social and cultural rights supported at the same level as civil and political rights? These are some of the issues examined by this committee.



### The main opinions of the External Relations Section (2010-2012)

- Civil society involvement in the EU's development policies (2012)
- Social Economy in Latin America (2012)
- The role of civil society in EU-Kosovo relations (2012)
- Towards an EU-Mercosur Association Agreement (2011)
- Trade, Growth and World Affairs: Trade Policy as a core component of the EU's 2020 strategy (2011)
- Scheme of generalised tariff preferences (2011)
- The contribution of civil society to the Eastern Partnership (2011)
- Rural development and employment in the Western Balkans (2011)
- Rural development and employment in the Euro-Mediterranean region (2011)
- Civil Society in the Euromed region (2011)
- The role of civil society in the EU-India Free Trade Agreement (2011)
- Sustainability Impact Assessments (SIA) and EU trade policy (2011)
- EU-Russia relations (2010)
- Iceland as a candidate country (2010)
- EU-Canada relations (2010)
- International trade and climate change (2010)



***European Economic and Social Committee***

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Published by: "Visits and Publications" Unit  
EESC-2011-22-EN

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**EN**

QE-30-11-090-EN-C  
ISBN 978-92-830-1580-2



doi:10.2864/79805



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