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EU ELECTIONS 2024:

a critical moment to rewrite Europe's future

FOREWORD

Reconnecting citizens with governance

Séamus BOLAND (IE)

President, Civil Society Organisations' Group



Séamus Boland © EESC

This newsletter concentrates on the importance of citizens voting in the [European elections](#)¹ from 6 to 9 June 2024, the elections for a new European Parliament. The elections are an opportunity for all of us to reaffirm our right to vote. It is also a crucial moment to reaffirm

our vision of a peaceful Europe at a time when war is ongoing on our continent and is likely to create more untold suffering into the coming year.

Recent discussions with various leaders in the European Parliament, Commissioners and others, continue to revolve around one question: How can decision-makers at EU level connect in a meaningful way with European citizens? The question why decision-makers should connect with people has already been answered: citizens are more and more attracted to extreme political movements. These extremes have one thing in common: they abhor the values of equality, freedom, social and economic inclusion and other fundamental rights, which act as the cornerstones of the European Union. The rhetoric of these political movements is based on the exploitation of people's fears, often created through disinformation campaigns. These fears demonise migrants, minority ethnic groups and other vulnerable groups. As a means of promoting these fears, the movements are exploiting a major gap and lack of trust between citizens and government authority. This gap is created by the consistent exclusion of civil society organisations from opportunities for dialogue in policy-making. It must be remembered that civil society organisations have millions of citizens taking part in their activities, which range from basic daily support to people, to involvement in various social and economic campaigns. This exclusion needs to stop and it can, provided there is a strong political and societal will to do so.

In a bilateral meeting with Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, I was heartened by his commitment to involve citizens in policy-making, as part of his green dialogue initiative, announced at the European Parliament and launched at our recent conference on [Empowering consumers on climate change](#)². There is agreement that citizens and their communities are essential to reaching the many environmental targets set out in various international agreements. However, such dialogue with citizens must be meaningful and not just a box-

ticking exercise, offering no value to the process. If consultations are meaningless and turn into "citizenwashing", they risk encouraging the spread of disinformation and extreme populist views.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege to meet hundreds of civil society organisation leaders in Ukraine. It was heartening to learn how committed all of them are to meeting the various requirements demanded by the EU to enter the Union. Because of the war and their fear of being governed by a totalitarian regime, they are unapologetic in striving to bring their country into the EU. In a visit to Bucha, which is a mere ten minutes' drive from the city centre of Kyiv, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) delegation which I was part of, learned about the horrors endured by the communities there when they were governed by the Russian army for thirty-three days. We stood in the grounds where some 477 citizens were buried in mass graves, having been indiscriminately shot in the streets as they went about their business – a fact confirmed by the UN.

Sadly, 2023 has been a year when the concept of peace has been in retreat. We must continually hope for real peace, firstly with ourselves, our immediate families and the communities that we live in. So as we come to the festive end of year season, let me wish the very best to all Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group and to all readers of our Bulletin!

Finally, it is also time to wish Cândida Reis, a very valuable staff member of the secretariat of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, all the best for her retirement. Cândida has been supporting the Group and its presidency for almost 15 years. On behalf of the whole Group, I would like to thank her for her very efficient work, diligence and pleasant manner with which she has always conducted herself towards Members and colleagues.

Séamus Boland

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1 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/19K3V69>

2 EESC conference, <https://europa.eu/lqycnhq>

EU ELECTIONS 2024: A CRITICAL MOMENT TO REWRITE EUROPE'S FUTURE

Optimism Amid Challenges: Shaping Europe's Future Together



Rudolf Kolbe © EESC

Rudolf KOLBE (AT)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations' Group
President, Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions
President, Austrian Federal Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineers

If you were expecting a worrisome and pessimistic text about the upcoming [EU elections](#)¹, you had better not continue reading. Yes, of course, there are threats and misdevelopments within our Union, but **I can see far more positive examples that show the European ideal has a future.**

Whether it was tackling the financial crisis, the refugee crisis or the pandemic, launching

- 1 European Parliament Elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/!9K3V69>
- 2 European Commission, Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>
- 3 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!DWM7rx>

As the European elections approach, the future of the EU feels increasingly uncertain



Ioannis Vardakastanis © EESC

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)
President, EESC ECO Section¹
President, Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP)
President, European Disability Forum (EDF)

President, International Disability Alliance (IDA)
Member, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)
Member, Greek National Commission of Human Rights (EEDA)

The [2024 European Elections](#)² will determine the direction the EU takes in the coming years. They come at a time of ongoing conflicts just beyond our borders - conflicts in which the EU and its Member States are heavily invested. Not only will the new European Parliament have a say in approving the Commissioners involved in navigating such conflicts, they will also need to agree on budgeting in times of crises and war.

Armed conflicts are not the only things playing on the EU's mind. The EU is also continuing to grapple with issues such as **environmental disasters, energy insecurity,**

the [Green Deal](#)² or coming together to support Ukraine or condemn the terrorism of Hamas, despite the diversity of ideologies, **large majorities or unanimity were always found within the European family.** I am not claiming that all problems have been solved, but I know that many of these problems can only be overcome by a **united Europe.**

And I am optimistic that a newly-elected European Parliament and a new Commission will continue along the path they have set out. There are plenty of tasks waiting. The **Green Deal** must continue and be expanded to include a [Blue Deal](#)³, as our Committee is advocating.

The **digital transformation** must ensure equal opportunities while at the same time fostering protection of privacy and cybersecurity. **Greater participation of citizens**, as well as

civil society organisations and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in **political decision-making processes** should further **increase the transparency and democratic legitimacy of the EU.**

Reducing social inequalities, ensuring that economic progress benefits all Member States and citizens, and expanding the **EU's role as a defender of human rights and solidarity on the international stage** - the list goes on.

I firmly believe that Europe, its institutions and especially its citizens can achieve this. The EU has always emerged stronger from crises in the past. Civil Society should encourage our fellow citizens to use the upcoming elections to choose political representatives willing to support these reforms and lead Europe to an even more successful future.

rising inflation, the migration crisis, and problems regarding the rule of law within some of its own Member States. The way the EU continues to address these also very much lies in the hands of the new College of Commissioners and the newly elected Parliament. Predictions around the outcome of the elections vary. Everything is very much to play for, meaning we are still a long way from imagining what the EU's position will be on these issues.

Of course, it is not only policy-makers that will determine our future as a Union. Even more significant will be the global and domestic events to which we will be exposed. During the last elections in 2019, nobody could have foreseen how much of the EU institutions' energy would be consumed by a **fatal pandemic and a hostile invasion of one of**

our closest neighbours. While we hope that the coming five years bring more stability, the new rule of thumb appears to be "expect the unexpected". What will truly **determine the future of the EU**, therefore, is our **ability to react to crises**, to respond quickly to the unforeseen, and **to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable** in society.



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- 1 EESC Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, <https://europa.eu/!RD39rY>
- 2 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/!9K3V69>

European Parliament elections in 2024: civil society engagement is needed for resilient democracy in Europe and beyond



Antonella Valmorbida © ALDA

Antonella VALMORBIDA
Secretary general of ALDA, the European Association for Local Democracy¹
Board member of the EPD, the European Partnerships for Democracy²

The European Parliament elections³ in 2024 may mark a watershed moment in European democracy. The threats are both internal – with polarisation and extreme narratives looking for immediate and simplistic answers to complex questions – and external – with wars and instability and with a relativisation of democracy in relation to a “possible” autocratic model coming from Russia or China. Europe needs to hold firm and **assert its values-based approach to democracy, whatever it takes**. The next elections will be difficult and extremely important.

ALDA, the European Association for Local Democracy, which represents 350 members (local authorities and civil society) and thousands of partners in Europe and beyond, has its finger on the pulse of the situation. We know that, in every corner of our continent, Europe is now on the agenda of everyone’s lives, but we also know that the **EU is often difficult to understand and is often manipulated as a scapegoat, where, in fact, responsibility lies more at national level**.

For all of us, **June 2024 will be a test of the resilience of democracy**, an opportunity to show how European policies are able to change people’s lives. For ALDA members

and partners in the enlargement countries, European accession policies are often described as a “transformative” process, setting rules and helping countries adapt to better governance and economic policies. The future European Parliament will need to prove that it is able to deliver on those very same targets. We advocate a strong commitment to completing the EU accession process with the Western Balkan countries, and a brave and solid engagement down that path with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Engaging citizens will be the key to success. This means presenting Europe in terms of what it is able to do and making it understandable to every European citizen. Let’s not speak only about the institutions but rather let’s focus on how **Europe is able to overcome multiple crises**, like in energy and health, but is also able to handle inflation and propose alternative sustainable systems of development.

We call for a campaign that is able to talk to and communicate with young people via their own means of communication and their own words, and engage them. Achieving a high turnout in the European elections is a must and we need **to engage civil society organisations and networks as partners**. We need to focus “beyond the bubble” and reach the corners of Europe with particular attention on low turnout countries and also especially on rural areas, with dedicated programmes of mobilisation. ALDA is particularly keen on **creating synergies between civil**

society and local authorities for an even stronger outreach of information and mobilisation.

As an EPD, European Partnerships for Democracy board member, I see in our community the big challenges that lie ahead of us. **Europe must lead in democracy and must be able to hold firm in difficult scenarios**. We support civil society and democratic engagement (especially among youth and women) all around the globe as key stakeholders demanding and implementing democracy. We would like to see the European Parliament elections driven by the need to put democracy at the centre of the vision and plans of the future candidates and subsequently the institutions that will lead the EU in the years to come.

Some projects preparing for the EU elections:

- TALE – Take the Lead in the EU Elections: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/tale-take-the-lead-in-the-eu-elections/>
- Inequalities matter: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/inequalities-matter/>
- Democracy support with EPD: <https://www.alda-europe.eu/wyde-ce-women-and-youth-in-democracy-initiative-civic-engagement/>



TALE project © ALDA

1 European Association for Local Democracy, www.alda-europe.eu
2 European Partnerships for Democracy, <https://epd.eu/>
3 European Parliament, Elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/19K3V69>

The urgent need for European communication



Thierry Libaert © EESC

Thierry LIBAERT (FR)
Spokesperson, EESC
Environment and Consumers Category Representative, Foundation for Nature and Mankind NGO
Research Associate, Catholic University of Leuven

The European Union has just benefited from three major events that could work in its favour: the difficulties of a post-Brexit UK and people’s change in attitude there, the relatively good management (compared to other continents) of the COVID crisis, and the war in Ukraine, which has increased **awareness of the need for a strong Europe**.

However, these events have not affected public opinion, **with a resurgence of**

extremist tendencies in countries such as Germany, Sweden, Italy, Spain and, lately, the Netherlands.

In the run-up to the European elections¹ (6-9 June 2024), we must consider the role played by communication. Some of the responsibility lies with communication, which has proved itself unable to pass on the message about, and demonstrate the attractiveness of, the European narrative.

1 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/19K3V69>

There are three areas for improvement.

Firstly, looking at it purely from a communication perspective, Europe as such does not exist: there are just European institutions, each one aiming to promote its own activities. Yet one of the basic principles of communication is to clarify the stance of the party trying to communicate. **It is vital that Europe speak with one voice.** Failing that, the European narrative will continue to be nothing more than a juxtaposition of compartmentalised institutional messages.

Secondly, the very foundations of the European narrative seem to be largely outmoded. Europe is still concentrating the majority of its efforts to justify its existence on the issue of peace: such a fundamental matter, but completely

outdated for a significant proportion of its population who have not experienced war for more than 80 years, even with the return of war to the continent. **It needs a new narrative.** This can be achieved by working on its values, on culture, on the social model, on a vision of the need for a green transition **which places people at the heart of the matter.**

Lastly, communication is disconnected from the daily lives of citizens in three ways. First, in terms of time: Europe only takes the stage every five years, when there are publicity campaigns urging people to vote in the European Parliament elections. Everyone involved in communication knows perfectly well that, in order to have an impact, **communication measures have to be sustainable and use a combination of different media.** Second, in

terms of the topics chosen for communication: while quite capable of showing how effective it is in saving Europe's big banks, the EU struggles to convince people of the value of its efforts to improve life for consumers. This is despite the fact that it has just voted in favour of new consumer rights, for example on better information on product sustainability and the right to repair.

Finally, **better involvement of civil society is needed.** Civil society is notable by its absence from a Europe which is built on a purely economic vision constructed around the principles of internal free trade.

This human and social dimension is vital. **The best way of communicating Europe's message is to communicate it in person.**

Beyond the Treaties, towards the construction of a European Federation



Alessandro MOSTACCIO (IT)
Secretary General,
Movimento Consumatori
Board Member, European
Consumer Union (ECU)

Alessandro Mostaccio © EESC

Over the last few years, the European Union has decisively faced up to some huge challenges. Primarily, it has sought to combat **climate change and regulate the ongoing digital industrial revolution.** These are historic challenges that are now inescapable, and which, albeit following a serious delay, are now finally being addressed with the necessary determination and intelligence.

The current European Commission has really moved up a gear. An unprecedented regulatory drive is taking place, which is having a major impact on both consumers and businesses, as well as, of course, on all institutions in the Member States. So, everything is fine? No,

on the contrary, each of the extraordinary events in recent years (COVID-19, the invasion of Ukraine and more recently the barbarity that is having a devastating toll on Israelis and Palestinians) has shown us that **as it is currently "organised" and "structured" the EU is fundamentally unequal to the task of pursuing its objectives.** And it is not going to be able to do more, it will not be able to play a strong political role in achieving peace, and it will have major difficulties securing access to the "rare earth" raw materials needed to advance its environmental and digital priorities. In short, with each passing year, **the EU is set to become increasingly marginal compared to many large emerging countries.**

It is now clear to European citizens that the responsibility for this inadequacy should not be put down to a lack of will within the current EU institutions or to the quality of its politicians, but to the structural/institutional deficiency of the Union itself, which is still **based solely on treaties.** The EU's very weak structure undermines the political authority and viability of the European institutions as

compared to that of its Member States.

This "institutional" inadequacy fundamentally undermines the possibility of establishing a common **foreign policy**, a common **defence policy** independent of non-EU countries, and a common **tax policy.** We, as civil society, therefore have a duty to call on the political parties, the institutions of all of the Member States and the European institutions to **complete the process of European integration**, starting this time from the institutional "bases", from its foundations, and establish **a federation of States based on a clear constitutional charter.**

Only then will Europe gain **a real, genuine political authority that will enable it to play the kind of leading role on the global stage** that all European citizens want to see. In a few months' time, we will be called upon to elect a **new European Parliament**¹. This is the last call; let's not waste this opportunity! Let's find a new vision and fresh hope, for the benefit of European citizens and for the benefit of people across the planet!

1 European Parliament Elections 2024, <https://europa.eu/!9K3V69>

Right of people with disabilities to political participation

In the EU elections year 2019, the EESC organised i.a. a public hearing on the right of people with disabilities to political participation and a dedicated side event during the Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held in New York. The Committee also adopted an **information report**¹ on the "Real rights of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections". The report was the result of almost two years' work, including a survey of national governments and a survey of organisations representing people with disabilities. It was met with great

interest at EU level and quoted more than 200 times in various media across Europe within the first two months of its publication. Many civil society organisations put direct links to the report on their websites. The report presents the legal framework for the right of people with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections and the legal and organisational barriers they still face, demonstrating that millions of EU citizens are effectively deprived of this right. The report was condensed in an **opinion**² adopted in December 2020 for which Krzysztof Pater, EESC Vice-President for Budget and Member

of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, was the rapporteur.



1 EESC report, <https://europa.eu/!WmJwqW>

2 EESC opinion SOC/638 on the need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections, <https://europa.eu/!Mu93Mk>

European Elections 2024: Gender and diversity among MEPs

Special interview conducted by **Aitana Garcia Domingo**, EESC trainee, Civil Society Organisations' group

The [elections for the European Parliament](#)¹ are a unique opportunity to determine who paves the way for the future of Europe. As **Chiara Corazza**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) Civil Society Organisations' Group, underlines, they come



Chiara Corazza © EESC

at a time of **multiple crises** for the European Union (EU), **including the climate, energy, demographic and security crises**. The EU also needs to cope with the digital transformation and faces a war at its borders.

In view of the upcoming European Parliament elections, three Members of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group have spoken out about the representation of minority groups and women in politics, touching upon the importance of representation in the current European multi-crisis context, the barriers to enhancing inclusion, and the potential for change towards a more representative and resilient Europe. Gender and intersectionality are only two of many relevant lenses when analysing underrepresentation and the EU's future, but they offer a valuable insight into the need and potential for change.

Key Figures: the European Parliament and the necessity for change

Since the first elections for the European Parliament in 1979, the percentage of female MEPs has increased with each election, reaching **41% in 2019**². Despite the Parliament's significant progress towards gender equality, **the lack of gender diversity in the European**

Parliament and in other decision-making bodies remains an issue. Although there are no EU-wide records available on the representation of **women with disabilities, women from ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ women and young and older women**, and hardly any national statistics on the representation of minority groups, it would appear that these groups are considerably underrepresented in the decision-making sphere. The issue of gender diversity and **underrepresentation also endures in policy areas and economic sectors most crucial** for addressing current challenges, and thus those most essential for Europe's future. Women **only occupy 22% of tech roles**³, **32% of the renewable energy sector**⁴, and **7% of CEO positions**⁵.

The importance of representation in a multi-crisis Europe



Ioannis Vardakastanis © EESC

Ioannis Vardakastanis, Member of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, President of the EESC [ECO Section](#)⁶ and president of the [Greek National Confederation of Disabled People](#)⁷, [European Disability Forum](#)⁸, and [International Disability Alliance](#)⁹, believes that European democracy is experiencing a **"crucial test"** under the **emerging threat of extremist populism**, which makes diversity among policy-makers even more important. He fears that without **people in decision-making driven by the goal of inclusivity**, the current system of underrepresentation is doomed to be reproduced.

Sif Holst, vice-president of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, president of the EESC's Equality Group and vice-chair of the [Disabled People's Organisation Denmark](#)¹⁰, gave another argument for more diversity in



Sif Holst © EESC

policy-making: people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by climate change. Initiatives like the ban on plastic straws, for example, failed to consider their adverse effects on people with disabilities. She underlined that **"the more diverse the backgrounds [of policy-makers], the better the solutions"**, as diversity is critical in guaranteeing that the **"solutions we implement suit everyone"**.

A similar issue related to facial recognition was mentioned by **Ms Corazza**, who represents France in the [G20 EMPOWER](#)¹¹ and the [G7](#)¹² [Gender Equality Advisory Council \(GEAC\)](#)¹³. [Facial recognition programmes](#)¹⁴ have difficulties recognising women's faces, particularly those of women of colour: "behind this algorithm you have **78% very well-intentioned, white men, coming from the same school and with the same education**. They want the best, but they **scale up unconscious biases**, using the data known to them. This is just one example (of unconscious bias) among millions", emphasised Ms Corazza. The absence of diversity in decision-making can even deteriorate the situation of affected groups. As highlighted by Ms Corazza, **"talent has no gender"**. Women from all groups can fill the current gaps in key industries, including in jobs of the future, and can **provide a different perspective to the ongoing transformations** that can improve Europe's performance. "That's why it's important to **have women where they have the power to change things** – at the heart of the economy and at the negotiation table", said Ms Corazza, "Just have in mind that **an equal representation of women in the economy would increase growth in Europe by 20%**¹⁵ according to the latest reports of the European Central Bank".

1 European Parliament Elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>

2 Statista, Gender Distribution in the European Parliament, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/300456/eu-parliament-turnout-for-the-european-elections/#:~:text=European%20Parliament%20In%202019%2C%2041%20percent%20of%20the,previous%20electoral%20period%20at%2037%20percent%20of%20MPS>

3 Techopedia, 60+ Women in Tech Statistics, <https://www.techopedia.com/women-in-tech-statistics#:~:text=Women%20in%20Tech%20in%20the,drop%20to%2021%25%20by%202027>

4 IRENA, Renewable Energy: A Gender Perspective, <https://www.irena.org/publications/2019/Jan/Renewable-Energy-A-Gender-Perspective#:~:text=Renewable%20Energy%20employs%20about%2032,lower%20than%20in%20administrative%20jobs>

5 European Women on Boards, Female CEOs, <https://europeanwomenonboards.eu/portfolio/gender-diversity-index-2021/>

6 EESC section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, <https://europa.eu/IRD39Y>

7 Greek National Confederation of Disabled People, <https://www.edf-feph.org/our-members/account-national-confederation-of-disabled-people-ncdp/>

8 European Disability Forum, <https://www.edf-feph.org/>

9 International Disability Alliance, <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/>

10 Disabled People's Organisation Denmark, <https://www.edf-feph.org/our-members/disabled-peoples-organisation-denmark/>

11 G20 EMPOWER, <https://www.g20empower-indonesia.org/>

12 G7, <https://www.g7hiroshima.go.jp/en/>

13 Gender Equality Advisory Council (GEAC), <https://g7geac.org/>

14 Harvard University, Racial Discrimination in Face Recognition Technology, <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2020/racial-discrimination-in-face-recognition-technology/>

15 European Central Bank, Empowering women in a changing global economy, <https://europa.eu/!rb9bCk>

Multiple barriers to diversity and representation

Interviewees agreed on the essential role of representativeness in tackling current challenges. However, different groups of women and other people from minority groups encounter various barriers when aiming to reach decision-making spheres. Mr Vardakastanis explained that for women from minority groups, “the **barriers they encounter do not start when they enter politics**. They are created long before, in education, employment, culture and other parts of life”. Ms Holst noted: “we have a **structure which is somehow based on [...] being a middle-aged, well-educated, white man from a privileged background**. As soon as you start moving a bit away from that, then things become a bit trickier”. From an intersectional perspective, she highlighted how elements such as women’s ethnic backgrounds, residence and/or disabilities interact and shape the barriers they encounter when entering the political sphere.

Party membership, which often constitutes the first step towards a political career, can be difficult to access for women with disabilities and from underprivileged backgrounds. Ms Holst mentioned the following barriers to party membership:

- **accessibility to facilities;**
- **cost of transportation;**
- **childcare responsibilities; and**
- **displacement from rural areas to cities.**

1 EESC Website, <https://europa.eu/!BPX9Wh>

When asked what specific obstacles women face, Ms Corazza recommended a shift in approach: “if you tell a woman ‘we need you at the European Parliament, because the laws that we make there **will really change the life of your children and grandchildren**’, then **women will go and fight to be Member of Parliament**. But if you just tell them ‘you have to travel to Brussels, be away from your family for a week and deal with this and that’, then she’ll say ‘OK, I prefer my family’”.

Momentum of change in elections: towards a diverse and resilient Europe

Election years **represent a momentum for change**, yet how can much-needed inclusion be brought forward in the European Parliament and beyond? Ms Holst noted that most parties have already selected their candidates, and that she was not aware of any candidates with disabilities running for the elections in Denmark. Now would be the time to support candidates from different age groups, backgrounds and genders to **ensure diverse voices are heard**. This support could take different forms, such as organising panels with multiple candidates.

Mr Vardakastanis was convinced that change will not appear from nowhere, and that votes can “**create a political environment that will allow for the participation of women in more decision-making processes**”. He said that gender is not the defining factor when choosing a candidate, since the elected person must be, above all, **inspired by the values**

of inclusivity and participation to promote representativeness and change across Europe.

Like Mr Vardakastanis, Ms Corazza did not consider the candidates’ gender the most important factor, but instead their capacity to use their decision-making power to enhance diversity in crucial sectors. She underlined that the **European Parliament must be a vehicle of change across Europe** by incentivising and promoting diversity and inclusion in key areas like security, energy and technology, which can redirect Europe’s future.

Conclusion

The interviewees called for **broad participation in the elections on 6-9 June 2024**. A high turnout could guarantee an **inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking Europe** that navigates the emerging challenges in the interest of all European citizens. As noted by Ms Holst: “**we have to be mindful when we set our vote**”. Representativeness and inclusion in the European Parliament can work as catalysts for change in the current multi-crisis context in vital areas”. Ms Corazza concluded: “**the European Parliament can and should be the world champion to accelerate gender equality**”.

To learn more about the Group and Committee’s work on equality and inclusion, [visit the EESC’s website](#)¹.

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

Unmasking citizenwashing: the dos and don’ts of participation



Jan Dirx © EESC

Jan DIRX (NL)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group
Liaison Officer, Groene11 (Green11), Dutch nature and environmental organisations

What kind of thing is that, citizenwashing? To explain, the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSOs Group) co-hosted a [symposium](#)¹ with the [European Environmental Bureau \(EEB\)](#)², on 14 November. About a hundred participants, in person and online, listened and spoke over the course of a morning in two panel sessions featuring a number of experts to clarify the concept of citizenwashing and how to avoid it.

The president of the CSOs’ Group, **Séamus Boland**, used the EEB definition in his opening

speech to clarify the concept of citizenwashing: “citizenwashing” is when public authorities and politicians give the appearance of involving the public in decision-making without actually taking their views into account. Mr Boland then discussed in more detail the role that civil society organisations play in a **participatory democracy**. For example, he pointed out that CSOs can play the role of **watchdog to monitor the quality of consultation processes**. And CSOs can ensure that the implementation of the results of the consultations is also properly followed up.

In an impressive speech, the [European Ombudsman](#)³ **Emily O’Reilly** outlined the importance and necessity of taking public consultation seriously. She started by pointing out that a recent [OECD study](#)⁴ found that only one third of citizens in mature democracies believed that their government would adopt opinions expressed in a public consultation.

And then she wondered: if public consultations cannot provide the authentic voice that citizens demand, what can?

She pointed out that the European Commission had been among the forerunners in organising public consultations, but that the instrument too often seemed to become a “**tick-box exercise**”, a task to be completed by officials in between the Regulatory Scrutiny Board and inter-service consultation. Evidence of this can be seen, for example, in consultation documents being published in English only, tight deadlines being set for responses, consultation periods that coincide with major public holidays, and, in one instance, the fact that 122 785 signatures on a petition counted as a single contribution. It is therefore necessary, she said, to set requirements for the consultation process, such as **ensuring that members of the public are able to understand how and why decisions are**

1 EESC symposium: <https://europa.eu/!BPjXTK>

2 European Environmental Bureau (EEB), <https://eeb.org/>

3 European Ombudsman, <https://europa.eu/!ym98vw>

4 OECD, Measuring trust in government to reinforce democracy, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fpublication%2Fb407f99c-en&csp_ =c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c987718b&itemlGO=oeecd&itemContentType=book

made, and **making the process inclusive**, striking a balance between stakeholders with limited resources and well-resourced, larger entities. Because **if citizens are given the opportunity to express their opinions**, weigh the evidence, consult with their peers and make recommendations, **impressive results will be achieved**.

During the panel discussions, several examples of failed and successful public consultations were discussed. The participants then drew up a number of recommendations on how to

ensure that consultations have the greatest possible chance of success. In addition to practical recommendations such as training for participants and, where necessary, reimbursement of expenses for participants, the highest priority is for the organising authority to formally determine how it will deal with the results of the consultation. This involves matters such as setting a deadline within which the authority will give a response as to how and when the recommendations will be implemented, or, as the case may be, within which it will set out a clear argument as to why

recommendations are not being adopted.

This was a rich debate that not only made all participants wiser, but also offered tools to strengthen participatory democracy.



Emily O'Reilly © EESC

The conclusions and recommendations from the symposium are available on the [EESC website](#)¹.

1 EESC, Conclusions and Recommendations, <https://europa.eu/!tkbrD4>

REFLECTIONS

CECOP cooperatives: Besides re-skilling and up-skilling, preserving existing skills is equally crucial



Diana DOVGAN
Secretary General,
European Confederation
of Industrial and Service
Cooperatives (CECOP)

Diana Dovan

What are the current challenges in terms of skills?

The [European Year of Skills](#)¹ was an opportunity to recognise the challenges faced by people in attaining the right skills for quality jobs, and by enterprises (especially small to medium-sized enterprises) in attracting the right skills. For our cooperatives, the challenges are quite similar. Europe has a significant challenge ahead in **connecting education and training centres with the enterprise world**, without leaving the social economy and cooperatives behind. Ensuring a permanent up-skilling and re-skilling of workers is another challenge, and investment and public support are crucial.

What proposals and/or demands did you have for the European Year of Skills?

If we want a well-functioning single market, strategic dependency for our economy, and quality jobs, it is crucial for the Member States to invest in skills, with the support of the EU.

For us cooperatives, there is a great need to teach the **cooperative business model** in business schools and universities. There is also a great need for education about worker-ownership, given that being both a worker and owner in an enterprise is a complex position that requires specific skills. In worker cooperatives, skills cannot be dissociated from elements such as aspiration to work for the common interest, solidarity, and trust.



Hinterhaus Productions © Gettyimages

Cooperative skills require those involved to go beyond self-interest and engage with others in a participatory and democratic way, with all the challenges that this implies.

What activities has CECOP² carried out in the context of the European Year of Skills?

This year, CECOP has been running a campaign on skills, although this is a permanent topic for us. Indeed, the [5th cooperative principle](#)³ "Education, Training, and Information" enshrines the responsibility that cooperatives have decided to take upon themselves to educate and train their members. Our campaign sheds light on the **different aspects of skills**, from training, up-skilling and re-skilling, to safeguarding skills, skills for participatory and democratic governance, and skills for the most disadvantaged workers. It also looks at how cooperatives and their representative organisations can invest in skills development and **adapt to the current green and digital transitions**. Thirdly, it addresses support measures needed from the EU level to

ensure that workers in cooperatives attain the right skills for quality jobs.

Besides re-skilling and up-skilling, preserving existing skills is equally crucial. We are losing too much of our know-how when enterprises relocate out of the EU. Every year, many European companies are saved from closure through worker buyouts, where workers convert the enterprises into a worker cooperative. To emphasise this aspect, CECOP hosted a conference on *Worker Buyouts – What is the Cooperative Key to Success?*, on 29 November, serving as the flagship event of our campaign.

As the Year comes to a close, what are your conclusions?

Let's not lose this political momentum and let's make sure that **skills remain high on the EU agenda** after 2023.

1 European Year of Skills, <https://europa.eu/!gXjRGt>

2 CECOP, <https://www.cecop.coop/>

3 International Cooperative Alliance, Cooperative identity, values & principles, <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity#:~:text=5.,development%20of%20their%20co%20operatives>

NEWS FROM THE GROUP

EU Green Deal: Maroš Šefčovič's first green dialogue takes place at EESC

Maroš Šefčovič, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, chose the conference [Empowering consumers on climate change](#)¹, hosted by the Civil Society Organisations Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 11 October, for his first green dialogue. Mr Šefčovič first spoke about the green dialogues at the hearing of the European Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, which confirmed his responsibility for the European Green Deal after Frans Timmerman's resignation.

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](#)². 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 at the Parliament's hearing. "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](#)³. "We want to show that we not only have the legal solutions, 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."

Mr Boland underlined the crucial importance of civil society involvement for the success of the green transition: "Civil society organisations, national and European policymakers must work together to design climate-neutral policies, with sufficient and targeted funding." Policies must address the varying impact of both climate change and the necessary green transition on different socio-economic groups. Clarity and predictability will



Maroš Šefčovič, Sian Hughes and Séamus Boland © EESC

help reassure investors that "we are changing to new technologies and behaviours".

Regarding the [social climate fund](#)⁴, expected to be operational in 2026, **Mr Šefčovič** said that "There will be around EUR 86 billion for structural measures and investments and short-term measures in particular, helping vulnerable households and micro-enterprises and supporting transport users." National energy and climate plans should be used to channel financial support to where it is needed.

With a view to more environmentally-friendly investment decisions, consumers need to be better informed and protected against greenwashing. **Mr Šefčovič** added that the Commission's work on ecodesign, packaging waste and green public procurement could lead to further savings for consumers. "We need to establish a more direct link between the benefits brought by the Green Deal and the lives of individual Europeans."

During the discussions, participants pointed out that the climate crisis threatens the cohesion of societies and increases existing forms of inequality. Urgent action is needed to mitigate the social repercussions of the crisis on vulnerable groups. The green transition will only be just if it is centred on people, respect and bottom-up approaches empowering local communities.

Farmers' representatives said that the agricultural sector is working hard to reduce emissions and remove atmospheric carbon, while producing high-quality, nutritious and affordable food. Policies should help them to reduce emissions through incentives, rather than coercion.

Consumer representatives called for policies that make sustainable alternatives available, affordable, attractive and convenient.

Environmental representatives warned that nuclear, hydrogen and carbon capture storage could distract consumers and investors from sustainable energy solutions and lead to higher costs. Consumers needed to have the option of participating financially in the green transition as prosumers. Further regulations and policies were needed to protect consumers and encourage them to make informed, sustainable decisions, such as the new proposal on common rules promoting the repair of goods.

A study commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group was presented during the conference. The study, on [The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU](#), investigates major climate-related risks for households in the EU by quantifying the relationship between a set of selected climate-hazard metrics, households' income by source and sector-specific expenditure.

Presenting the findings of the study, **Lorenza Campagnolo**, researcher at the [Fondazione Centro Euro- Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici \(CMCC\)](#)⁵, said that the economic impact of climate change did not affect all EU households in the same way. "Southern Europeans will face particularly negative and regressive impacts from increasing health, electricity, food expenditure and income contraction, increasing their poverty risk."

The **conclusions and recommendations** from the conference are available on the [EESC website](#)⁶.

The Civil Society Organisations' Group has been focusing on climate change and its impact on Europeans for several years. The need for a just transition in particular was explored at two events, one in Ireland¹ and the other in the Czech Republic².

1 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!KGBc9G>

2 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!8n9HlyM>

1 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!qycnhq>

2 EESC, The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU, <https://europa.eu/!mNCntr>

3 European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>

4 European Commission, Social climate fund, <https://europa.eu/!yG8Xjr>

5 Fondazione Centro Euro- Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici, <https://www.cmcc.it/>

6 EESC, Conclusions and Recommendations, <https://europa.eu/!8GdNb3>

EESC study: The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU

[This study, carried out by the Euro-Mediterranean Centre on Climate Change \(CMCC\)¹](#), provides a comprehensive assessment of the **economic costs of climate change impacts, adaptation, and mitigation for EU27 households**. It investigates the major climate-related risks for households in the EU by quantifying the relationship between a set of selected climate-hazards metrics, households' income by source, and sector-specific expenditures, capturing both the climate induced cost of impacts and adaptation measures. This analysis is complemented with the assessment of mitigation policy costs for households using a mixed modelling approach.

The report highlights the distribution of climate change costs by type (income source- and selected good/service expenditure-related) across regions (NUTS1 level) and socioeconomic characteristics of households (poor, medium income and rich households). In addition, the implications of climate change costs on income distribution and risk of poverty are analysed. **The vulnerabilities of EU households** highlighted in this study call for risk-specific policy measures at national and EU level and the transversality of climate change costs, especially in Southern EU, **will require horizontal policy integration**.

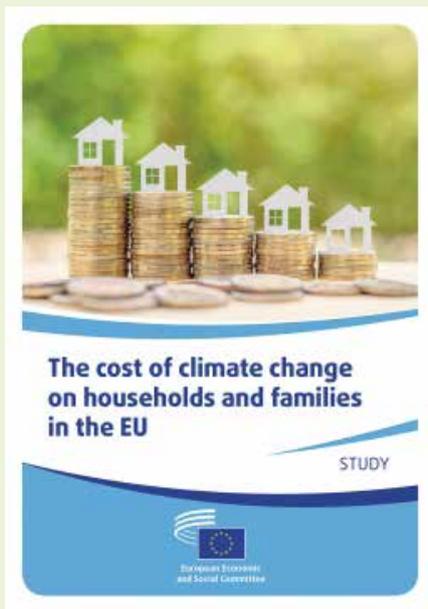
Interview with Lorenza Campagnolo (coordinator) and the team involved in this study, researchers at the [Fondazione Centro Euro- Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici \(CMCC\)²](#).

How did you prepare the study?

The study on "The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU" was a great opportunity to shed some light on how costs of climate change impacts, adaptation measures and mitigation policies affect households in EU **depending on the region where they are located and their socio-economic characteristics**. The study acknowledges the gap in the literature of a broad climate change cost assessment focusing on EU households and proposes new methodology and results combining [Eurostat's³](#) household income and expenditure information, climate-related hazards and modelling tools. Our study considers both household income losses and climate-induced expenditures as a direct consequence of impacts of climate change or adaptation needs.

What are the study's main findings?

Different EU regions and socio-economic groups **will bear differentiated impacts due to climate change** in 2050. Considering a moderate climate change scenario, household health expenditure will likely increase in the



Northern and Southern EU, food expenditure in the Eastern, Western and Southern EU, electricity across all regions and insurance especially in the Northern EU. This rise of expenditure will put a **heavy burden on poor households**, facing a reduction in the capability to diversify consumption and limitations in their ability to adapt. At the same time, labour income losses will emerge in the Southern EU and total income losses will be widespread across all regions.

Negative and regressive (weighing more on poor households than on rich ones) impacts on a wide range of expenditures on goods/ services and income sources will be observed

especially in the Southern EU (health, electricity and insurance expenditures, and total labour income), marginally in the Eastern EU (food expenditure) and in the Northern regions (electricity and insurance expenditures). **Climate change will likely increase the population at risk of poverty across the EU**; climate change mitigation scenarios will likely reduce it, favouring a faster growth of low-skilled labour remuneration compared to high-skilled one.

Following the findings, what are the main recommendations?

The main recommendations for policy-makers are to prioritise regions, as in the case of the Southern EU, experiencing at the same time negative impacts on households and regressivity and to strengthen and tailor income support measures to the most vulnerable segments of the population in these regions. Furthermore, the multi-sectoral characteristic of climate change costs calls for **horizontal policy integration** to improve the effectiveness of policy-making.

The study and the executive summary can be downloaded from the [EESC website⁴](#).



Authors of the study © CMCC

1 EESC study: The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU, <https://europa.eu/!mNCnr>
2 Fondazione Centro Euro- Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici (CMCC), <https://www.cmcc.it/>
3 Eurostat, <https://europa.eu/!Bw69Dh>
4 EESC study and executive summary, <https://europa.eu/!mNCnr>

Environmental standards and labels: how can consumers make sense of it all?

The Members of the [Consumers and Environment Category](https://europa.eu/!nf36rW)¹ met on 13 November to discuss environmental standards and labels and their impact on consumption.

The guests were **Emily Spiesser** from the [French Agency for Ecological Transition \(ADEME\)](https://www.ademe.fr/en/frontpage/)², **Michela Vuerich** from the non-profit [European Association for the Coordination of Consumer Representation in Standardisation \(ANEC\)](https://www.anec.eu/)³ and **Emmanuelle Maire**, Head of Unit for [Circular Economy, Sustainable Production and Consumption](https://europa.eu/!pk46ky)⁴ at the European Commission.

The discussion focused on how agencies and the European Commission try to organise and streamline the proliferation of labels. It was noted that more than half of the environmental labels in the EU are self-proclaimed and often unsubstantiated, which is a real problem for consumer confidence.

The afternoon session was devoted to an internal meeting. **Radoslava Stefankova**, responsible for consumption in the [INT Section](https://europa.eu/!xDFdFt)⁵ secretariat, presented the ongoing work in relation to consumers. She provided



Consumers and Environment Category meeting © EESC

the updated programme for [European Consumer Day](https://europa.eu/!QG4c3B)⁶ on 11 December and informed participants that the Commission is holding the 3rd edition of its [Annual Digital Consumer Event](https://europa.eu/!cn87Yg)⁷ on 30 November.

Tiina Vyyryläinen, member of the jury for the [EU Product Safety Award](https://europa.eu/!cn87Yg)⁸, then briefly presented the selection process for which the winners will be announced on 11 December, ahead of European Consumer Day.

Thierry Libaert delivered a brief report on the [CCMI](https://europa.eu/!fu46bN)⁹ event entitled “Ten years of planned obsolescence”, which took place at the EESC on 9 November.

The spokespersons, **Bernardo Hernández Bataller** and **Thierry Libaert** then invited the Members to reflect on next year’s work programme and to suggest topics that could be discussed at future meetings.

- 1 EESC Consumers and Environment Category, <https://europa.eu/!nf36rW>
- 2 French Agency for Ecological Transition (ADEME), <https://www.ademe.fr/en/frontpage/>
- 3 European Association for the Coordination of Consumer Representation in Standardisation (ANEC), <https://www.anec.eu/>
- 4 Directorate General for Environment, <https://europa.eu/!R7mnmW>
- 5 EESC Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT), <https://europa.eu/!pk46ky>
- 6 European Consumer Day (ECD), <https://europa.eu/!QG4c3B>
- 7 Annual Digital Consumer Event, <https://europa.eu/!xDFdFt>
- 8 EU Product Safety Award, <https://europa.eu/!cn87Yg>
- 9 EESC Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), <https://europa.eu/!fu46bN>

Social Economy Category looking for a just taxation system

On 7 November 2023, the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) [Social Economy Category](https://europa.eu/!ht47UKF)¹ held its third and final meeting of the year chaired by spokespersons **Giuseppe Guerini** and **Justyna Ochędzan**. During the opening session of the meeting, Members discussed what the **ideal taxation system would be for the development of the social economy in the EU**. Members heard from [DG TAXUD](https://europa.eu/!M9MwXg)², who gave an overview of their work on this matter. It was noted that the Member States’ fiscal frameworks tend to be complex and that the fiscal support in Member States depends on the presence and strength of welfare organisations and the non-profit sector. **Professor Gabriele Sepio** from the [Italian National School of Public Administration \(SNA\)](https://sna.gov.it/)³ explained how the Italian scenario could serve as an example of how to build a special

category on taxation of the social economy to help NGOs.

The second part of the meeting looked at a specific case study on taxation in Member States, focusing on Poland and handling of Value-added Tax (VAT) in [European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\)](https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/)⁴ projects. The VAT rate in Poland is 23%. Polish authorities consider that tax benefits for social economy entities could undermine competition. Members expressed their disagreement with this practice since these **entities in the social economy often replace public administrations and do not work for profit**.

The final part of the meeting focused on

the current [Spanish](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/coordination-european-affairs/belgian-presidency-council-european-union)⁵ and upcoming [Belgian Presidency](https://europa.eu/!M9MwXg)⁶ work in the field of the social economy. The Spanish Presidency stated that social dialogue and civil society organisations had been key to the implementation of their priorities. They described their efforts to create **decent working conditions**, including in the areas of **mental health** and the **digital workplace**. The Belgian Presidency announced several conferences related to this priority, on gender mainstreaming, the [European Year of Skills](https://europa.eu/!M9MwXg)⁷, and inclusive and green transition.



Social Economy Category meeting © EESC

- 1 EESC Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UKF>
- 2 Directorate General for Taxation and Customs Union, <https://europa.eu/!NwKnmk>
- 3 Italian National School of Public Administration (SNA), <https://sna.gov.it/>
- 4 European Social Fund Plus, <https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en>
- 5 Spanish Presidency of the Council, <https://europa.eu/!M9MwXg>
- 6 Belgian Presidency of the Council, <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/coordination-european-affairs/belgian-presidency-council-european-union>
- 7 European Year of Skills, <https://europa.eu/!gXjRg>

Farmers' Category discusses new genomic techniques and strategies for the post-2027 Common Agriculture Policy

On 18 October 2023, the [Farmers' Category](#)¹ held its final meeting of the year, chaired by spokespersons **Arnold Puech d'Alissac** and **John Comer**. The meeting started with presentations by **Dominique Dejonckheere**, Senior Policy Advisor at [Copa Cogeca](#)², and **Thor Kofoed**, chairman of Copa Cogeca Working Group/Seeds, on the [European Commission's Proposal](#)³ on **new genomic techniques (NGTs)**. During the debate, Members discussed the effects of new regulations on plants produced by certain NGTs on the agricultural sector. NGTs facilitate the **creation of resilient varieties**, which could help address climate change and food security. However, Members called for precaution given the unsolved questions of how to **monitor the dissemination of modified seeds** and how to **inform consumers on the use of NGTs**.

In the second part of the meeting, the Category exchanged views on the ongoing work of the opinion [NAT/913 "Promoting autonomous and](#)



Farmers' Category meeting © EESC

[sustainable food production: strategies for the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#)⁴. Members emphasised that the next CAP strategy should **adopt a long-term vision that accounts for the European market's new realities, and support more European farmers**. Factors to consider are climate change, rural development, market volatility and EU enlargement.

Finally, **Maurizio Reale** presented the Sustainable [Development Observatory's focus](#)⁵ on **participation and inclusiveness** in its objective of speeding up the implementation of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#)⁶. He highlighted the importance of **responding to emerging challenges while protecting human rights**.

1 EESC Farmers' Category, <https://europa.eu/IgY64Wf>

2 Copa Cogeca, <https://copa-cogeca.eu/>

3 European Commission, New techniques in biotechnology, <https://europa.eu/I7QD8Cx>

4 EESC opinion NAT/913, <https://europa.eu/HtDpDc7>

5 EESC Sustainable Development Observatory, <https://europa.eu/Ht88Vb>

6 United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Associational Life Category explores open public spaces and inclusive advocacy

On 18 October, the [Associational Life Category](#)¹ held its third meeting of the year. The meeting started with a discussion on the topic of "Living Democracy, Living Europe", moderated by **Andreas Kruse** and co-spokesperson **Andris Gobiņš**. Together, the Members discussed several issues:

1. *Shaping public spaces with a view to promoting a living democracy*
2. *Promoting personally perceived co-responsibility for the common good as a task of political education*
3. *The importance of civil society for a living democracy: how does civil society engagement contribute to a living democracy? What examples can be found at national and international level?*
4. *How can engagement in the European idea be promoted?*

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Member **Mr Kruse**, who kicked off the discussion with a speech, stressed the importance of inclusive public spaces. He argued that it was important to approach people in terms of their co-responsibility and responsibility for the common good and to take them seriously in this respect.

The second panel of the day was an opportunity for a debate on **best practices in working with leadership and advocacy in a more inclusive way**. **Xesc Mainzer**, Co-Chair of the Task Force on Empowerment and Diversity of [Young European Federalists \(JEF\)](#)² participated in the debate which was moderated by co-spokesperson **Sif Holst**. Mr Mainzer presented two projects developed by JEF, which sought to bring together diverse groups of young people to design inclusive

campaigns ahead of the 2024 European elections and empower them to bring European issues to the local level.

The Category meeting also gave Members the opportunity to discuss topical issues, with several Members **giving updates on ongoing EESC legislative files**. The Category then finalised its **work programme for the 2023-2025 period**.



Associational Life Category meeting © EESC

1 EESC Associational Life Category, <https://europa.eu/IVD38XB>

2 Young European Federalists (JEF), <https://jef.eu/>

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

Gender Equality: What's next?



Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality and Evelyn Regner, VP European Parliament © EESC

At its October plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on *Empowering Change: Charting the future of gender equality* as part of the European Parliament's [Gender Equality Week](#)¹. Several guest speakers, including European Parliament Vice-President Evelyn Regner and European Commissioner Helena Dalli, took part in the debate.



Séamus Boland © EESC

Séamus Boland, the president of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, underlined the persistence of gender pay gaps in Europe. "Women need to work six weeks more each year just to make up the difference," he said. He used these figures to remind Members that economic growth does not necessarily go hand in hand with equality.



Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia © EESC

Several Civil Society Organisations' Group Members took the floor. **Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia** made the point that citizens as consumers can make a difference by considering gender equality in their purchasing choices.



Svjetlana Marijon © EESC

"Are we all equal?" was the question raised by **Svjetlana Marijon**. She asked for an initiative to have equal compensation for participation in meetings and travel costs across the European institutions to improve the conditions for female EESC Members.



Dovilė Juodkaitė © EESC

Dovilė Juodkaitė condemned the fact that "gross violations of fundamental rights are still happening and inflicted mainly on women with disabilities across Europe". She called on

the EU to include a total ban on the forced sterilisation of women with disabilities in the upcoming legislation on combating violence against women.



Jan Andersson © EESC

Jan Andersson said that progress had been made but was not happening fast enough. He called for women and men to change society together.



Justyna Ocheźdzan © EESC

Justyna Ocheźdzan said that women needed more social supports so that they could reconcile their responsibilities at home and in the workplace and emphasised that "this help is our right". She asked for this right to be respected across the European institutions and in each Member State.

1 European Parliament, Gender Equality Week 2023, <https://europa.eu/lcpPn99>

The European Economic and Social Committee presents the #EUBlueDeal Action Plan



Kinga Joó, one of the rapporteurs for the EESC opinion on A call for an EU Blue Deal © EESC

At its October plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) unveiled its plan for a comprehensive EU water strategy, the [EU Blue Deal](#)¹. With this initiative the EESC is leading the way as the first European institution to take concrete steps to address the water crisis.

The current European approach to water is deeply flawed. Instruments for water are too fragmented to meet the challenges of water scarcity, pollution and climate change head-on. This is why the EESC urges the EU institutions and the Member States to take a bold and integrated approach to confronting the water crisis through a comprehensive strategy that includes a single access point for funding and enhanced water knowledge.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** presented a [political declaration](#)² with a set of 15 guiding principles and 21 concrete actions to make the Blue Deal a reality, including water consumption labels for products, a Blue Transition Fund as a single access point for water investments, and water conditionality in EU funds in order to avoid supporting projects that run counter to the EU's water objectives. The declaration also calls for a dedicated European Commissioner in charge of addressing the water portfolio.

As well as the presentation of the political declaration, the EESC plenary welcomed **Mariana Mazzucato**, Co-Chair of the [Global Commission on the Economics of Water](#)³, and **Pedro Arrojo-Agudo**, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to water and sanitation, for a debate. Several Members of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group (CSO Group) took the floor.

Kinga Joó, one of the rapporteurs for the EESC opinion on [A call for an EU Blue Deal](#)⁴, which summarises the Committee's recommendations, highlighted the importance of affordability and accessibility of water. She said: "Access to safe drinking water and sanitation is not a privilege, but a fundamental right acknowledged in several international and EU commitments. Yet, some communities in the EU, particularly vulnerable social groups, continue to struggle with water poverty. Our call for a Blue Deal has the potential to play a significant role in mitigating disparities in access to clean water and sanitation facilities throughout Europe."

The EESC initiative proposes ensuring fair water prices. It advocates making water affordable for all, while emphasising the need for targeted investment in water and sanitation infrastructure, with a specific focus on socially deprived urban and rural neighbourhoods to ensure universal access to water.



Krzysztof Balon © EESC

Krzysztof Balon, vice-president of the CSO Group, underlined the essential role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in implementing the human right to water and sanitation in the EU. However, implementing the EU Blue

Deal required the support of not only CSOs, societies and the European institutions, but also specific people in the Member States. He hoped for further victories for pro-European parties in national elections that would work towards the Blue Deal.



Baiba Miltoviča © EESC

The president of the EESC's [TEN section](#)⁵, **Baiba Miltoviča**, spoke about the section's contribution to the EESC initiative: the EESC opinion on [Sustainable and resilient water infrastructure and distribution networks](#)⁶. The opinion highlights the need to address the outdated water infrastructure in many EU Member States. Ms Miltoviča warned against the negative effect of water shortages on the production and storage of electricity and called for better regulation of water consumption and for more effective financial support for water infrastructure. "Our economy should be organised in such a way as to reduce water consumption and improve our water reuse systems."



Ágnes Cser © EESC

Ágnes Cser said that health – another fundamental right – was not possible without water. For the implementation of the EU Blue Deal, water needed to be addressed in every policy. Ms Cser saw the need for a new economic policy in view of the water consumption of industry, the energy sector and agriculture and called for legal instruments to safeguard the rights to water and good health.

Finally, **Alain Coheur** emphasised the Committee's work in relation to the initiative: "More than 30% of the Committee Members were involved in drafting the documents.

1 EESC EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!DWM7rx>

2 EESC declaration, <https://europa.eu/!qgK7Yn>

3 Global Commission on the Economics of Water, <https://watercommission.org/>

4 EESC opinion CCMI/209, <https://europa.eu/!ChnDkk>

5 EESC Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN) Section, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>

6 EESC opinion TEN/804, <https://europa.eu/!xGPRQN>



Alain Coheur © EESC

The Committee has initiated a proposal for a completely new political initiative. No decision on policies linked to the Blue Deal should be taken without consulting the Committee.” The establishment of a stakeholder platform on water was essential for the future, and the EESC needed to take part in this.

The EESC believes that the European Union must take a leading role in water resilience at international level and work with other

countries to address the global water crisis. As part of this effort, an EESC delegation will participate in [COP28](#)¹ in December to advocate international action on water-related issues.

1 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop28>

OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 25 and 26 October 2023. The EESC plenary adopted 29 opinions of which 14 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR), rapporteur, [NAT/908](#)¹ Plants produced by new genomic techniques

Cillian LOHAN (IE), rapporteur, [NAT/912](#)² Revised monitoring framework for the circular economy

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT), rapporteur, [INT/1037](#)³ Social economy package

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL), rapporteur, [REX/555](#)⁴ Energy policies and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region

Jarmila DUBRAVSKÁ (CZ), rapporteur, [NAT/909](#)⁵ Revision of the Mercury Regulation

João NABAIS (PT), co-rapporteur, [SOC/776](#)⁶ Update of the anti-corruption legislative framework

Justyna Kalina OCHEŹDZAN (PL), rapporteur, [SOC/774](#)⁷ Digital skills and education package

Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT), rapporteur, [INT/1034](#)⁸ Retail investment package

Kinga JOÓ (HU), rapporteur, [CCMI/209](#)⁹ Umbrella opinion “A call for an EU Blue Deal”

Krzysztof BALON (PL), rapporteur, [ECO/623](#)¹⁰ Environmental, social and governance ratings

Martin SCHAFFENRATH (AT), rapporteur, [INT/1030](#)¹¹ Pharmaceutical package

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL), rapporteur, [TEN/802](#)¹² Equity and efficiency considerations for maritime transportation

Rudolf KOLBE (AT), rapporteur, [INT/1020](#)¹³ Modern Business Responsibility - Avenues for elevating MSMEs ability for successful transformation

Zsolt KÜKEDI (HU), rapporteur, [NAT/907](#)¹⁴ Revision of the EU waste framework Directive

1 EESC opinion NAT/908, <https://europa.eu/!WhwrjW>

2 EESC opinion NAT/912, <https://europa.eu/!vH3Mkq>

3 EESC opinion INT/1037, <https://europa.eu/!WhCbxt>

4 EESC opinion REX/555, <https://europa.eu/!ktvKqb>

5 EESC opinion NAT/909, <https://europa.eu/!rrPP93>

6 EESC opinion SOC/776, <https://europa.eu/!t6Togr>

7 EESC opinion SOC/774, <https://europa.eu/!l7ydK4b>

8 EESC opinion INT/1034, <https://europa.eu/!rmM7bT>

9 EESC opinion CCMI/209, <https://europa.eu/!ChnDkk>

10 EESC opinion ECO/623, <https://europa.eu/!rQd8Jb>

11 EESC opinion INT/1030, <https://europa.eu/!ddW4XP>

12 EESC opinion TEN/802, <https://europa.eu/!CdyFPC>

13 EESC opinion INT/1020, <https://europa.eu/!Nq9R73>

14 EESC opinion NAT/907, <https://europa.eu/!vGyKYv>

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the [Committee’s website](#)¹⁵

The **next EESC plenary session** will take place on **17 and 18 January 2024**. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit [our website](#)¹⁶.

A list including all **new work appointments** of Civil Society Organisations’ Group Members is available on the [Committee’s website](#)¹⁷.

15 EESC opinions, <https://europa.eu/!wF86wY>

16 EESC plenary sessions, <https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG>

17 EESC, New work appointments, <https://europa.eu/!PJkBXy>

UPCOMING EVENTS



10/01/2024 – Extraordinary Bureau meeting of the Civil Society Organisations' Group

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Editorial Adviser: Jan Dirx

Editors: Aitana Garcia Domingo, Tim Gemers, Irina Jancova, Jasmin Klötzing, Catlin Lhoest, Enrica Nardello and Margarida Reis

Deputy Editor: Susanna Baizou

Editor in Chief: Fausta Palombelli

Secretariat of the Civil Society Organisations' Group,
European Economic and Social Committee,
99 Rue Belliard, 1040 Brussels
Tel. +32 (0)2 546 9548

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