



## REX newsletter | The EESC in the world

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Dear Reader,

For the REX section, the year coming to an end has been marked by a wide range of activities and results. On the other hand, we end 2023 with the war in **Ukraine** still ongoing and not yet nearing a peaceful solution, while a second war is raging again in the **Middle East**.

These tragic events are matters of deep concern for the **European Union**: not only are these tragedies happening in our back yard, they also entail heavy human losses, hatred, destruction, humanitarian crises, ecological catastrophes and far-reaching destabilisation of entire regions of the world. In the face of these events, we must finally show assertiveness and take resolute action to change things. Humanitarian aid is highly important, but it is not enough: the EU must speak with a single voice and take the initiative in matters of defence and security.

As pointed out in the ongoing opinion REX/571 "Strengthening Multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of Civil Society contribution to the UN system", the EU as an important international actor has a responsibility to work to promote and reinforce **multilateralism** and a rules-based world order with the **United Nations** at its centre. In particular, the UN should give the Global South a stronger say and change the rules; the reform of the UN must be pursued by the EU together with the African Union; the EU needs to speak and act as one in the United Nations; the UN must involve civil society more in this process.

It will not be easy to reform the UN in the current highly tense geopolitical situation, where so many global actors fight for predominance, but making the decisions of the UN more effective is the only way to re-establish order in the international arena. The European Union pursues goals such as peace and international cooperation, democracy, fundamental rights, the rule of law, and environmental protection: all these values cannot just be the common wealth of Europeans and a few other countries: they must thrive everywhere if we want humanity to get back on track and to revert to a more sensible way of inhabiting this planet.

For what is in European hands, it is crucial to continue with **EU integration**, both internally and externally, for example accelerating the **enlargement** to candidate countries, and also to start

thinking about a **reform** of our institutional framework that can streamline European action in order to make it able to face all the challenges ahead.

The EESC's **External Relations Section** will continue working on all these topics, with a special focus on peace-making, enlargement, fundamental rights, climate protection, a just transition, and fair and open trade agreements. We will keep channelling the ideas and innovative potential of **civil society** into meaningful and effective opinions that can make a valuable contribution to the European decision-making process.

I wish you a Merry Christmas and a happy holiday season.



**Dimitris Dimitriadis**  
REX Section President

### Ukraine and EU civil society



On 2-3 November, EESC President Oliver Röpke paid the **first official Committee visit to Ukraine** since the beginning of the Russian invasion.

He reaffirmed the unwavering **support of the EESC** for Ukraine's reconstruction efforts and European aspirations. The visit, which took place ahead of the presentation of the European Commission's Enlargement Package, provided an opportunity for President Röpke to discuss Ukraine's progressive integration into the EU and the recent EESC initiative to involve **Enlargement Candidate Members** from Ukraine in its work, starting in 2024. The EESC emphasised that Ukraine's reconstruction must take place in full respect of human and labour rights, rule of law, transparency, equality and through a genuine social dialogue.

On 2 November, the Delegation held high-level meetings with Ukrainian state officials, including Yuliia Svyrydenko, First Deputy Prime Minister; Iryna Vereshchuk, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories; Oleksandr Yarema, State Secretary of the Cabinet of Ministers, and Oleksandr Korniienko, First Deputy Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (see picture). During these meetings, the EESC Delegation had an opportunity to discuss in-depth the **European integration of Ukraine**, the need to deepen economic cooperation with the EU, and the involvement of civil society and social partners in these endeavours. The EESC expressed its readiness to assist in Ukraine's capacity building, drawing on the experience of EU Member States with recent post-war recovery.

On 3 November, the EESC Delegation held meetings with the representatives of Ukraine's trade unions, employers and business associations, and civil society organisations, gaining first-hand insights into the current situation regarding the labour legislation, involvement of social partners in decision-making, and the functioning of social and civil dialogue during wartime. In the afternoon, the Delegation visited Bucha, the site of a massacre perpetrated by Russian forces, to pay respects to the Ukrainian civilians and soldiers who lost their lives in the war of aggression against Ukraine.

On 8 November, EESC President Oliver Röpke and REX Section President Dimitris Dimitriadis mentioned the official visit in their **EESC Statement** on the European Commission's Enlargement Package (see below in this issue of the Newsletter), noting that Ukraine remains at the forefront of the EU's foreign agenda and underlining the resilience of Ukrainian civil society and the steadfast commitment of Ukraine's government to reforms, which are all the more impressive given the ongoing conflict.



## The Middle East and Civil Society



### Euromed Follow-up Committee's Statement on the terrorist attacks by Hamas

On 11 October, the members of the **Euromed Follow-up Committee** made a statement during the Alicante conference on "Climate change and migration in the Mediterranean", **strongly condemning** the horrific terrorist attacks conducted by Hamas in Israel and their tragic consequences. They **expressed solidarity** with the victims and **deep concern** for the civilian population in Israel and in Palestine. The parties in this conflict must return to peaceful and constructive dialogue under the auspices of the United Nations, based on human rights and on the existing mandatory international agreements: diplomatic dialogue and cooperation are essential tools for restoring **peace and stability** in the region. The EESC will

work to reinforce open channels of communication and foster exchanges, together with civil society in Israel and Palestine. [Full text here](#)



## The EU, Montenegro, and the pace of reforms

On 7 December, the **EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee (JCC)** met to take stock of Montenegro's accession progress, in particular the reform of its public administration, which is being challenged by the demands of the EU agenda. The Montenegrin JCC members expressed the eagerness of their country's civil society to participate in the EESC's Enlargement Candidate Members initiative, while the EU side of the JCC underlined the intention to work closely with the Montenegrin counterpart so that organised civil society can positively contribute to the goal of **EU enlargement to Montenegro**.

More specifically on the **public administration reform**, the members of the JCC urged the Montenegrin authorities to swiftly change the current legislative framework, including the **Law on the Prevention of Corruption**, which treats representatives of social partners and civil society organisations as public officials, solely because they have been formally appointed by the government. This is in contradiction with their mission to represent the interests of organised social partners, putting in jeopardy their autonomy and independence as non-governmental and non-profit organisations.

The two parties detailed these demands in a [joint declaration](#) to be distributed to the Montenegrin authorities and to all relevant EU institutions.



## EU and Vietnam: 3rd DAG-to-DAG meeting

On 27-28 November, the two **Domestic Advisory Groups** established under the **EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement** (EU DAG and Vietnamese DAG) held a common meeting in Brussels. This DAG-to-DAG meeting, the third of its kind, took place in the context of the **Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development** meeting and of the **Joint Forum** open to the domestic advisory groups of both sides and other stakeholders.

The DAG-to-DAG meeting was preceded by a **workshop** on "Improving workers' rights and access to remedy and grievance mechanisms". The agenda items of the meeting itself included discussions on due diligence, on the situation for small coffee producers and farmers in Vietnam, on the implementation of the Vietnamese Work Plan on Labour Rights, the state of play of the ratification of ILO fundamental conventions by the EU member states and Vietnam, on the right to association as an essential element of chapter 13, and on responsible and sustainable

aquaculture and fisheries. Following the meeting, the EU DAG released a [statement](#).



### Transatlantic alliance in combatting disinformation

On 23 November, the **Transatlantic Relations Follow-up Committee** hosted a panel of speakers who engaged in a very interesting debate on the importance of a transatlantic alliance in the **fight against disinformation**. Mr Ruth Kronenburg, Executive Director of the Free Press Unlimited, Ms Emma Bergmans from Free Press Unlimited, Mr Alexander Gubsky, Chief of the Moscow Times and Mr Ingo Mannteufel from Deutsche Welle provided an objective image of the state of play on the global scene, as well as their experiences and challenges of fighting media manipulation. The meeting also discussed the topic of education and training close to companies' needs with Mr Joe Ross, president of REACH University.



### 32nd meeting of the EEA Consultative Committee

In the context of the EESC's mid-term renewal, the EU delegation to the **European Economic Area** Consultative Committee (EEA CC) was increased from six to twelve EESC members. On 21 November, this enlarged EEA CC gathered for its 32nd meeting in Brussels, co-chaired by István Komoróczy for the EU side and by Kristin Hansen for the EFTA side.

First the members discussed **labour mobility** in the EEA, on the basis of a presentation on this topic by Sigried Caspar from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). An exchange of views on **EU-Switzerland relations** took place with MEP Lukas Mandl, EP rapporteur on this subject: the European Parliament calls on both sides to use the window of opportunity for talks on a possible new negotiation package and a cooperation agreement between the EU and Switzerland, and to reach an agreement before the end of term of the current Commission and Parliament.

The EEA CC members were also briefed on the EESC **information report** on [The Arctic - how to ensure a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous future for a geostrategic region](#), and the possible steps the Committee is planning to take on this subject. In 2024, when the EEA celebrates its 30th anniversary, the EEA Consultative Committee meeting will be held in Iceland.

### EU-Serbia JCC sends strong messages on the situation in Serbia

On 17 November, the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) met in Belgrade, in the presence of H.E. Emanuele Giaufret, Head of the EU Delegation in Serbia, and Mr Miroslav Gačević from the Serbian Ministry of European Integration. Serbian civil society gave courageous input on the **difficult situation in the country**, especially as regards media capture, the rise of violence or backsliding of civic space and freedom. Their input contributed greatly to the [joint](#)





[declaration](#) with concrete recommendations for the EU and Serbian authorities.

The JCC calls on Serbia to seize the **new enlargement momentum** and define its genuine objectives and direction by clarifying its foreign policy stances and resolving its outstanding regional issues; warns of the need not only for reforms, but for their genuine implementation; congratulates the EESC for opening its doors to candidate countries through the **Enlargement Candidate Members** initiative; expresses deep concerns about the **rise of violence** in Serbia and notes the scale of citizens' past and current protests; recommends the attribution of the 5th national frequency in a manner to obtain **media pluralism** that is so crucial to the Serbian media landscape; gives recommendations for **fairer and free elections** on 17 December 2023 and an enabling environment for vibrant Serbian civil society to thrive, as the backbone of any real democracy. The meeting received significant media coverage in Serbia following the press conference the day before [Medija Centar \(in Serbian\)](#).



### Trade and Sustainable Development: 2nd Civil Society Forum at the EESC

On 14 November, the EESC hosted the 2nd Civil Society Forum on Trade and Sustainable Development with the title: "**The other side of trade: a bottom-up approach to sustainable development**". Moving on from the fundamental question "Have we been listening?", the event examined Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) from different angles with a common, inclusive, bottom-up and solution-oriented approach.

Civil society representatives from developing countries, the main beneficiaries of TSD policies, shared their views on concrete labour, environmental and human rights issues associated with trade, including practical proposals and success stories. They were joined by high-level speakers from the EU and multilateral institutions, and EU civil society representatives, with the aim of bridging the perceived gap between what the EU is trying to do on TSD and related policies and the true needs on the ground. The event was successful and well-attended. It will now undergo appropriate follow-up, as we will report in the next issues of this Newsletter.

### Africa, Caribbean, Pacific (ACP): civil society on the new agreement with the EU

On 9 November, the **ACP-EU Follow-up Committee** held a meeting for an update on ACP-EU relations, with a view to discuss the participation of civil society in the new Samoa Agreement signed on 15 November.



Following this meeting, the Follow-up Committee adopted a [statement](#) welcoming the **signing of the Samoa Agreement**. The new Agreement will strengthen relations between the European Union and African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries, improving our collaboration on common challenges. Calling for a swift

implementation of the Agreement, the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee strongly advocates for the active inclusion of civil society, social partners and the private sector in the decision- and policy-making process, in order to fully implement the ambitious objectives laid out in the Agreement across its various policy areas.

In its statement, the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee makes some recommendations on the **involvement of civil society** in the implementation and monitoring of the Agreement, based on its more than 20-year experience as a unique joint ACP-EU civil society body.



### EESC delegation bolstered ties with Scottish civil society in Edinburgh

On his first official visit to Scotland on 9 November, EESC President Oliver Röpke signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** with the Scottish Advisory Forum on Europe (SAFE) identifying areas for cooperation and mutual support between SAFE and the EESC.

Collaboration is expected to focus on a number of **key issues** that have emerged since Brexit, including youth mobility, climate change and renewable energy, trade and the post-Brexit impact on living standards and the availability of public services. The Memorandum represents a significant milestone in the continuation of positive and innovative relationships between Scotland and the EU, paving the way for enhanced cooperation.

During the first day of their visit to Edinburgh, the EESC delegation also held useful discussions with several political representatives. This was followed on the second day by EESC participation in the **All-Nations Summit**, a UK-level event to discuss key issues such as youth, climate change and green energy, economy-related issues and citizens' rights, including how civil society on both sides of the Channel can take advantage of future opportunities to work together.



### EESC Statement on the European Commission's Enlargement Package

On 8 November, EESC President **Oliver Röpke** and REX Section President **Dimitris Dimitriadis** published a **statement** on the **European Commission's Enlargement Package** welcoming the recommendation to open accession negotiations with **Ukraine and Moldova**. The EESC also welcomes the decision to open accession negotiations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and to grant candidate status to **Georgia**, subject to them meeting certain necessary conditions.

The EESC has a pivotal role to play as the house of organised European civil society in advocating for EU enlargement, and is fully dedicated to serving as a genuine **Civil Society Gateway** for candidate countries, as well as to assist these nations in upgrading their democratic and socio-economic systems to align with EU

standards, particularly concerning **civic and social dialogue** and the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**.

The EESC it will transform the existing Civil Society Platforms into **Joint Consultative Committees** (civil society bodies tasked with monitoring accession negotiations), select **Enlargement Candidate Members** among civil society representatives from candidate countries in order to integrate them in the daily work of the Committee, and perform **civil society health checks** in candidate countries through its Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group. This latter work will be coordinated with the Commission's Rule of Law Report. [Read more](#)



### Keep calm and carry on! EU-UK DAGs meeting and Civil Society Forum under the TCA

The Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) set up under the **EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement** and tasked with advising on its implementation held their second joint meeting in London on 6 November 2023.

The joint meeting started with an update by the UK and EU DAG chairs on work done since the last meeting in October 2022, as well as on the outlook on future collaboration. Work continued with thematic focused discussions, in particular concerning regulatory cooperation and the level playing field (including labour and environmental issues, and climate change), the Windsor Framework and trade in goods (including the Border Target Operating Model and regulatory cooperation). Sir **Oliver Heald**, Chair of the UK Delegation to the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, introduced and moderated a fruitful exchange with members of both DAGs. Finally, in preparation for the Civil Society Forum taking place the following day, the DAGs held a discussion to agree on a [Joint Statement](#), reaffirming their [commitment to work together on joint solutions](#).

This agreement was reached the next day, which was dedicated to the second Civil Society Forum (CSF) organised by the European Commission in London. Open to civil society organisations representing business and employers' organisations, trade unions and other workers' representatives, NGOs and academics, this year's edition of the Civil Society Forum discussed trade in goods, regulatory cooperation and the level playing field, energy and climate change, and trade in services.



### Russia and Central Asia on stage

On 6 November, the **EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-up Committee** met for the first time under its enlarged portfolio. The first panel was dedicated to "**Russia**: human rights, disinformation and current situation in the country", and the second to the new subject of "**Central Asia**: situation of civil society and venues for cooperation".

During the first panel, the EEAS updated the FuC members on the Russian situation after Prigozhin's attempted coup, while an activist



of the human rights defence organisation OVD-Info presented their report on **disinformation** in Russia against the background of the current **war against Ukraine**. The main message of her presentation was that, despite massive propaganda and repressions (with approximately 20 000 detentions documented), there are still Russians openly challenging the regime (see the "No to war" sign in the picture): civil society in Russia is still alive and will not stop its activity. During the second panel, the EEAS presented the situation of Central Asia with a special focus on civil society in **Kazakhstan**, a topic on which the EESC is ready to start working.

Finally, there was a short debate on the positive outcomes of the conference against disinformation held in **Sofia** last June (see July issue of this Newsletter) and on the next one of the series, which is will be held in April in the Moldovan capital **Chişinău**.



### Hearing on the new climate change and security nexus

Within the framework of the EESC's work on opinion [REX/578](#) "Addressing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on peace, security and defence", a **hearing** took place on 6 November. Renowned experts such as Mr Jean-Michel Valantin (The Red Team Analysis Society), Ms Raphaela Engel (EEAS), Dr Jamie Shea (GMACCC), and Mr Lukas Rüttinger (Adelphi) engaged with the members in a rich discussion, contributing greatly to the drafting of the opinion.



### The EESC and Eurolat

From 31 October to 2 November, the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EUROLAT) held meetings of the Standing Parliamentary Committees at the Senate of the Dominican Republic in Santo Domingo. These meetings were attended by a delegation from the EESC's Latin America Follow-up Committee formed by Mr Josep PUXEU, Vice-Chair of the EESC Latin America Follow-up Committee, Mr John COMER, Vice-Chair of the FuC and Chair of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee, and Mr Dumitru FORNEA, Member of the FuC and of the EU-Colombia/Peru/Ecuador Domestic Advisory Group, as well as rapporteur of the opinion on The Global Gateway.

Our delegation took part in sessions dedicated to social dialogue, fighting inequalities, food security, digitalisation, sustainable development, gender rights, women's empowerment and trade. The EuroLat meeting with Latin American civil society, chaired by MEP Marc Angel, focused on "Migration from an ecological perspective" and "Citizen participation to collaborate in the development of a more fair and democratic society". The EESC was acknowledged for its active participation and meaningful contribution to the debates.



### EU-Canada DAG ready for new term

On 27 October, the **EU-Canada Domestic Advisory Group (DAG)** held its 14th meeting, which was also its first meeting of the 2023-2025 term. The members elected the body's new chair, Ms Eleonora Catella, and two vice-chairs, Ms Tanja Buzek and Mr Daniel Pérez Vega. The European Commission reported on the state of play and provided updates on the Trade and Sustainable Development agenda. The members also discussed lessons learned and accomplishments of the previous mandate, as well as the DAG's priorities for the upcoming term.



### 9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum: EU enlargement is now closer

On 19-20 October, the **9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum** brought together approximately 120 participants, including a broad range of civil society representatives from the EU and the Western Balkans, alongside representatives of EU institutions (including **Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography) as well as international organisations and governments of the region.

The Forum, organised by the EESC with the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, the Regional Cooperation Council and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), was held in **Thessaloniki**, to mark the 20 years of the historical meeting where the European future of the Western Balkans was confirmed.

Civil society representatives greeted the new momentum for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans countries, and stressed the need for greater support and safeguarding of civic space to facilitate the essential socio-economic reforms required for EU integration. Opening the forum, the EESC president **Oliver Röpke** presented his **Enlargement Candidate Members** initiative, whereby civil society representatives from the Western Balkans will be able to work alongside the current Committee members on important opinions concerning their region.

The [Declaration](#) adopted at the end was intended as an input to the European Commission's Enlargement package of November and the EU-Western Balkans Summit in December. [Read more](#)





### Joint EU-Andean DAG events in Bogota

On 18-20 October, a delegation of 8 members of the EU Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) for Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, including members of the EESC, took part in joint meetings with their Andean counterparts in Bogotá, Colombia. It was the first physical meeting of the DAGs since 2018. The events included a Joint DAGs meeting and a Joint Workshop on corporate due diligence, carbon emissions reduction and deforestation. It was an important achievement to bring on board all of the three partner DAGs, and a [Joint Declaration](#) was signed. Our delegation also participated in the 10th meeting of the Civil Society Forum, to discuss important issues in the field of trade and sustainable development.

Besides the Andean DAGs, the delegation had meetings with the Head of the EU Delegation, the EU Chambers of Commerce and EU Member States representatives in charge of trade issues, as well as with representatives of indigenous communities and representatives of the Colombian Parliament working on the long-awaited labour reform.



### EESC-ESC Spain joint conference "Climate change and migration in the Mediterranean"

On 10-11 October 2023, the EESC and the Economic and Social Council of Spain co-organised in Alicante a conference dedicated to "Climate change and migration in the Mediterranean". While both topics (**climate change** as well as **migration**) had already been analysed extensively in many EESC opinions, the combination of the two topics (migration due to climate change leading to climate refugees) provides a new and very relevant angle to them. A [UN estimate](#) suggests that water stress could displace 700 million people by 2030, while a [World Bank report](#) indicates that there could be 216 million internal **climate migrants** by 2050.

In addition to EESC members, the conference included speakers representing the economic and social councils of France, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal and Spain. Furthermore, there were contributions from Casa Mediterráneo, the Union for the Mediterranean and the International Labour Organisation. The symposium was held at the premises of Casa Mediterráneo in Alicante and was endorsed by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU as one of its official events.



### Japan: resuming contacts after COVID

On 3-5 October, the **EU-Japan and South-East Asia Follow-up Committee** carried out its mission to Japan. Our delegation had meetings not only with traditional partners from civil society and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also with new stakeholders, including outstanding academics and a member of the Japanese parliament.

The discussions focused mainly on the post-COVID-19 situation and the effects of the pandemic on **Japan's economy and society**, new

developments in **Japan's migration policy** considering the current demographic decrease, **current geopolitical issues** following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, potential problems in the region and the **green and digital transformation of Japan**. Furthermore, **mental health** was mentioned several times in the discussions, as were integration issues, new forms of work and the **talent package**.

The main objective of resuming contacts with Japanese civil society after the disruption caused by the pandemic was fully achieved. The EU and Japan are facing similar problems, and it was a good time to strengthen relations, which will be built on in the future.



#### 41st Meeting of the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee

After the 40th meeting in Izmir in November 2021, the **EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee** met in Brussels on 4th October for the first time in the new configuration on the EU side and with Veselin Mitov as the new co-chair. On the Turkish side the JCC is co-chaired by M. Rifat Hisarcıklıoğlu, the President of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB).

The opening session included speeches by Laurențiu Plosceanu, EESC Vice-President in charge of Communication and Ambassador Faruk Kaymakcı, Permanent Delegate of Türkiye to the EU, as well as by representatives from DG NEAR and the EEAS. The JCC discussed many substantive issues: among others, the current situation and future outlook for SMEs, the situation of social partners, migration issues and, last but not least, the space for **free and independent civil society** to participate in political, economic and social life in Türkiye and the EU. A [joint statement](#) was concluded after the meeting by written procedure.



#### The EESC at the Annual Public Forum of WTO

On 12-15 September, the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** held its annual Public Forum in Geneva, Switzerland. 3400 participants convened from all over the world to discuss the theme of the forum, "It is Time for Action", focusing on how trade can contribute to a **greener and more sustainable future**.

Like every year, the EESC was present with a delegation. Bilateral meetings were held with two Deputy Director-Generals of the WTO, Jean-Marie Paugam and Angela Ellard, to discuss the upcoming Ministerial Conference 13 in Abu Dhabi (February 2024) and the most important open dossiers, such as sustainability and the **reform of the WTO**. The EESC delegation also met several representatives of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to discuss topics of common interest and explore future collaborations. This mission provided important inputs that were useful for the EESC Civil Society Forum on Trade and Sustainable Development of 14 November.





## A common meeting of all Eastern Neighbours' Platforms

On 11 September, the REX Section organised a joint meeting of the EESC's Civil Society Platforms with **Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine**. The Platforms monitor the implementation of the Agreement each of those countries has with the EU, providing the monitoring process with a civil society point of view: they inform of shortcomings in terms of legislation or implementation and provide recommendations to the EU and third countries' governments.

Civil society across Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia has gained extensive expertise and knowledge on a diverse range of topics, such as human rights, social dialogue and sustainable development. This expertise needs to be put to full use to boost development and enhance the well-being of their citizens. The main topics addressed were disinformation and the skills agenda.

The fight against **disinformation** has become a global challenge, which means involving all actors is key. Disinformation targets vulnerable communities and society's weaknesses: the more a society is educated and resilient, the more difficult it is to spread fake news. Therefore, disinformation needs to be tackled through education and innovation, as well as by supporting the combined efforts of the media, CSOs, government agencies, the business sector and international organisations.

At a time when manual work is increasingly being superseded by technology, society needs to focus on **skills** that only humans possess such as strategic thinking, leadership and creativity: civil society excels in these skills and can have a vital role in overcoming resistance to change. Being digitally-skilled and environmentally sensitive, **young people** have the potential to be catalysts of the green and digital transitions. [Watch the video](#)



## DAGs: a welcome meeting for new members

On 7 September, an all-virtual meeting took place to welcome the members of the **Domestic Advisory Groups** (DAGs) at the beginning of the new 2023-2025 DAG term. There were well over 100 DAG members connected and much active participation throughout the meeting. The DAGs are groups coordinated by the REX secretariat with members nominated by DG TRADE representing business, workers and other civil society organisations, as well as a minimum of three EESC members on each DAG. Their primary work is to serve as watchdogs for the **trade and sustainable development** chapters of EU free trade agreements, although some of the DAGs' scope is broader.

The meeting was an opportunity for new and returning DAG members to meet with the REX secretariat and staff from DG Trade. EESC member and DAG coordinator **Tanja Buzek** opened the



meeting, after which there was a presentation on the lifecycle of a DAG, followed by some sharing experiences and best practices. The meeting concluded with a very active and friendly time of Q&A. Overall, this welcome meeting gave returning members an opportunity to share their wisdom and experience and gave new members a lot of practical information on how to carry out their mandate.



### **9th meeting of the EU-Korea Civil Society Forum under the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement and Workshop**

The 9th EU-Korea Civil Society Forum (CSF) took place on 4-5 September 2023 in Brussels. The event started with a workshop discussing cooperation in international fora on environment and climate and the state of play of civil society in the EU and Korea.

During the CSF, the members of the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) discussed the digital economy and its connections to sustainability, the circular economy and environmental policy developments, as well as labour relations in the light of the rise of platform work and other non-standard forms of work. In particular, they assessed the implementation progress of the 2021 Panel of Experts' report and recommendations in the presence of a representative from the International Labour Organisation. Joint conclusions, prepared by both sides, were discussed and adopted.

## **Opinions in the spotlight**

### **REX/576 – The EU Maritime Security Strategy**

On 21 September, the EESC adopted an opinion on the Commission's joint communication on the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan, highlighting the importance of multilateralism as a key policy for the EU's external action in the area of maritime security. The EESC believes that EU-NATO cooperation should be further strengthened to achieve more effective coordination in different areas of common interest, including critical infrastructure. The unpredictability of maritime security due to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and the expansion of China's activities to ports in several European countries are examples of topics needing such coordination. Furthermore, the EESC calls on the EU to step up engagement with international partners to tackle issues of mutual concern, such as people smuggling and human trafficking. Proactive measures are needed to manage these risks as close to their source as possible, such as the development of a centralised surveillance hub at EU level and the inclusion of maritime security cooperation in future EU trade agreements.

### **REX/573 – EU Global Health Strategy**

On the same day, the EESC adopted an opinion on "EU Global Health Strategy - Better health for all in a changing world". The EESC supports the adoption of a renewed strategy and stresses the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach by addressing the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. It recommends enhancing investment and responding to the shortage of healthcare workers, whose working conditions should be improved. The Committee also calls for the establishment of a civil society engagement mechanism for the effective

implementation of the strategy, as well as for improved governance at country level, taking into account the complexity of health systems.

### Opinions adopted at the 13-14 December Plenary session

[REX/571](#) - Strengthening Multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of Civil Society contribution to the UN system

[REX/569](#) - EU Climate Diplomacy

[REX/572](#) - Global battle of offers – from the Chinese Belt and Road initiative to the EU Global Gateway: the vision of European organised civil society

### Ongoing opinions and information reports

[REX/580](#) - EU-UK youth engagement

[REX/579](#) - European economic security strategy

[REX/578](#) - Addressing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on peace, security and defence

### An op-ed article on enlargement to the Western Balkans reports

EESC member Andrej Zorko published the op-ed article "**9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum: A clear need for a realistic final date for EU membership**" on the Italian but Brussels-based info agency [www.eunews.it](http://www.eunews.it). You can read the article at <https://www.eunews.it/2023/12/11/western-balkans-civil-society/>

### La brochure REX aussi en français!

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