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**NATURE RESTORATION LAW
IN THE FOCUS OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

FOREWORD

Civil dialogue and farmers

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Séamus Boland © EESC

On 27 February, the European Parliament voted in favour of the [Nature Restoration Law](#)¹, which will now go to the Council of the European Union for adoption. Nature in Europe is in alarming decline, and this is why the

and managing the enormous challenges facing them due to the necessary systemic change. Given that the average farm size in the EU is 17.4 hectares, it is clear that incomes as well as food security are in jeopardy if farmers do not get the support they need for this transition. As Christine Lagarde once said when talking about the recession, the key priority for all those involved in this transition will be 'to restore a dialogue with adults in the room'. And as you can read in this newsletter, our planet is in great danger - unless we correct the way we are managing nature.

European Commission proposed this new law which seeks to restore ecosystems for people, the climate and the planet. The law is a key part of the [EU Biodiversity Strategy](#)². The Members of Parliament adopted the proposed law with 329 votes in favour, 275 against and 24 abstentions³. At first glance, this outcome would suggest that there are major disagreements on whether the Nature Restoration Law is necessary. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

The conflict is really about how it will be implemented and reflects European farmers' lack of confidence as to whether their interests will be upheld. A cursory reading of the scientific literature explaining just why nature restoration is necessary will convince anyone: unless we stop destroying natural ecosystems, avert the real and present danger that thousands of species will become extinct and somehow restore our very fragile ecosystems, we will disrupt our ability to produce food in the medium and longer term. However, while farmers are adapting the way that they farm to comply with the many existing environmental commitments, they are extremely worried about the economic viability of their activity.

This is the busiest time of year for farmers, so if they are protesting rather than working their fields, we have to take what they are saying seriously. Farmers are and will continue to be custodians of our nature systems. They need support in terms of increased research into different farming systems

On 29 February, I was honoured to meet with His Excellency Willem van de Voorde, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the EU, to follow up on our [open letter](#)⁴ on the implementation of an open, transparent and regular civil dialogue at EU level in all policy areas. Ambassador van de Voorde has kindly agreed to speak at our major conference on [Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward](#)⁵ on 25 March, and I would highly recommend that you take part. The conference will also include the presentation of the [EESC opinion](#)⁶ on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward. This opinion was requested by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU⁷ and adopted by the Committee during its February plenary session. Our Group Vice-President Pietro Barbieri led the work on this key opinion. With so many Europeans being drawn to extremist political movements, there is a serious danger that unless the EU continues to work on the recommendations of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)⁸, we will find ourselves living in a deeply divided European Union.

European democracy will also come under the spotlight later this year, with the [elections to the European Parliament](#)⁹. I urge all voters to cast their vote and to distinguish between facts and disinformation in the campaigns running up to the elections.

Séamus Boland

1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/!qFDVgf>

2. European Commission, Biodiversity strategy for 2030, <https://europa.eu/!NXhMKJ>

3. European Parliament, Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea, <https://europa.eu/!rW8VJM>

4. EESC, Open letter: European Institutions must recognise, involve and support Civil society as part of a structured Civil Dialogue, <https://europa.eu/!yG8b6t>

5. EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!pjKVBb>

6. EESC, opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/!7P7gXw>

7. Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

8. European Commission, Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://europa.eu/!CNwFyK>

9. European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>

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NATURE RESTORATION LAW IN THE FOCUS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

On 27 February, the European Parliament approved the long-debated [Nature Restoration Law](https://europea.eu/lqFDVgf)¹. The text requires Member States to introduce measures restoring nature on 20% of the EU's land and sea by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. It sets specific, legally binding targets and obligations for nature restoration in various ecosystems — from agricultural land and forests to marine, freshwater and urban ecosystems.

Member States will be required to avoid

significant deterioration in healthy habitats, and introduce targeted measures to increase the quality of grassland butterfly populations, nature-friendly features like hedges on farmland, and/or carbon storage in soils. After concerns from some Member States over the cost of introducing nature-boosting measures, the European Commission agreed to allocate more funding. The law also provides for an emergency brake, so targets for agricultural ecosystems can be suspended under exceptional circumstances if they severely reduce the land needed for sufficient food

production.

The file will now be presented to the Council, which will have to approve it by qualified majority before it can enter into force.

For further reading:

- European Commission proposal for a Nature Restoration Law: <https://europea.eu/lqFDVgf>
- Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea: <https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM>

1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europea.eu/lqFDVgf>

Equitable Nature Restoration: Ensuring Fairness for Farmers and Forest Owners in Biodiversity Conservation



Simo Tiainen © EESC

Simo TIAINEN (FI)
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In summer 2022, the European Commission published a proposal for a [restoration regulation](https://europea.eu/lqFDVgf)¹, a law for the recovery of nature. The proposed regulation seeks to halt biodiversity loss and forms part of the [EU's biodiversity strategy](https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM)².

An agreement by the EU's decision-making bodies on the **Nature Restoration Law** was reached in November 2023 after several [trilogue](https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM)³ negotiations, and the text was approved by the European Parliament's Environment Committee. The European Parliament gave its approval at its plenary on 27 February 2024. The final vote on the issue in the Parliament was quite tight, with the Regulation approved by 329 votes in favour, 275 against and 24 abstentions⁴.

In its [opinion](https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM) on *Nature Restoration targets under EU biodiversity strategy*⁴, the EESC stressed, among other things, that the

measures taken so far to support biodiversity had not been sufficient, and called for legally binding obligations on the Member States. However, **the Committee considered it a serious shortcoming that the economic impact of the measures** put forward by the Commission, in particular on private land managers, **had not been taken into account**. The EESC has already made clear that farmers and forest owners should not have to bear the cost of protecting biodiversity. Rather, providing this "**public good and value**" should become a new source of income for them. The Committee believes that land managers must be compensated for their financial losses when making more extensive use of their land to increase biodiversity. The EESC therefore called for a **European biodiversity fund** and to look for new ways for the various EU policies (Common Agricultural Policy, energy, housing, transport, etc.) to help achieve the binding objectives of the regulation. The EESC also stressed that the economic and social perspective must be fully acknowledged in the context of nature restoration.

Following the final adoption of the EU restoration regulation by the Council, Member States will start implementing it at national level. To this end, **national restoration plans** will be drawn up, setting out the means to achieve the regulation's

objectives. The national restoration plans are due to be completed within two years of the regulation entering into force. It is important for Member States to have sufficient room for manoeuvre in implementation so that different circumstances can be taken into account. **It is crucial that the measures are acceptable and fair**. These objectives can be achieved in a number of ways and through a variety of instruments. From a private forest owner's point of view, **a voluntary and incentive-based approach** is by far the best option. At EU level, the impact assessment has been weak and rightly criticised. There is a need for a high-quality and comprehensive impact assessment of national implementation, taking into account different perspectives. Open communication on implementation is also important. The landowners covered by the measures and their representatives must be consulted and involved.



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1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europea.eu/lqFDVgf>

2. European Commission, Biodiversity strategy for 2030, <https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM>

3. Tripartite meetings ('trilogues') between the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission serve to negotiate legislative proposals between the institutions. Any provisional agreement reached in trilogues is informal and has therefore to be approved by the formal procedures applicable within each of the two institutions.

4. European Parliament, Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea, <https://europea.eu/lrW8VJM>

5. EESC, opinion NAT/841, <https://europea.eu/lC36TY7>

Why do we need a European Regulation to restore ecosystems?



Arnaud Schwartz

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On 22 June 2022, the European Commission presented a [proposal for a regulation](#)¹ to implement restoration measures on at least 20 % of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, as well other degraded ecosystems in Europe by 2050.

Healthy and functional ecosystems on land and sea are needed to mitigate the impact of climate change, ensure long-term food security and improve human health. **Restoring**

nature is also a productive investment for our economy: the European Commission estimates that each euro invested in restoration generates between 8 and 38 euros in profit²!

Restoring our ecosystems is also urgent – currently, [81% of European habitats are in poor conservation status](#)³. A complete collapse of biodiversity is under way, sped-up by the consequences of climate disruption as well as land take (urban sprawl, road infrastructure, agro-chemistry, industrialisation of animal rearing and forestry), hunting and overfishing, pollution and invasive alien species.

Voluntary commitments made by the Member States have so far proven inadequate. Having a regulation at European level would hold them accountable, while laying down a clear framework, objectives and deadlines, as well as cooperation between Member States.

In light of the twin crises – **climate change and biodiversity loss** – there is an urgent need to act. In line with the adoption of the [Global Biodiversity Framework](#)⁴ at the COP 15 in Montreal⁵, the EU must lead by example by translating, as soon as possible, its international commitments into an ambitious law to restore nature. We are a part of it – it is our only real life insurance.



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1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/CXcqt>

2. European Commission, Questions and answers on Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/bXwp6X>

3. European Commission Report on the status and trends in 2013 - 2018 of species and habitat types protected by the Birds and Habitats Directives, <https://europa.eu/IHX37xK>

4. United Nations Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-cbd-press-release-final-19dec2022>

5. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of a Convention. All States that are Parties to this Convention are represented at the COP.

Restoring nature is a necessity



Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia © EESC

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The [Nature Restoration Law](#)¹ is the logical step we have to take as a society to walk firmly on the path of the [European Green Deal](#)². Without nature, there is no agriculture. Without nature, there is no livestock farming. Without nature, there are no businesses. Without nature, there is no consumption. Without nature, there is no

future. As **consumers**, organised as part of civil society or individually, we play a key role in this area. **With our individual choices, we send messages and signals to businesses** to make them truly think about sustainability when developing their products and implement policies ensuring transparency in all their processes.

As organised consumers, we push them – in the positive sense of the term – to adopt policies and practices that help ensure the sustainability of our land, while calling for laws and government regulations that promote the **sustainability of our environment**.

The Nature Restoration Law is taking a lot of criticism because we are wearing reading glasses, which are the wrong kind. To understand this law, we need to put on our

distance glasses and **see the medium and long term** – because if we fail to understand that our environment does not belong to us but is simply on loan, we will have understood nothing. **It is a loan we should pass down to future generations** in better condition, if we can.



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1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/IqFDVgf>

2. European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/I8bB4bR>

The nature restoration law: a fundamental investment in our future



Silvie Kreibiehl ©
Christine Gabler



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The Deutscher Naturschutzring (German Nature Conservation Association - [DNR](#)) feels strongly that **the Nature Restoration Law**² is an **urgently needed commitment** to a future worth living in Europe. It's an opportunity to preserve and expand our dwindling ecosystem services. The loss of healthy ecosystems doesn't only hurt nature: humans and the economy pay the price

too, as drinking water, pollination services, natural flood protection, the cooling function of forests, and recreation and health all depend on healthy ecosystems.

The worsening climate crisis, with persistent droughts, wildfires and recently massive flooding in Germany, shows just how vulnerable we are. The economic damage caused by natural disasters is immense and getting worse. The Nature Restoration Law makes an important contribution to prevention and crisis preparedness. Every euro invested in restoring nature generates a return of between EUR 8 and 38 in the form of ecosystem services³, as the European Commission has shown. **The Nature Restoration Law must be implemented effectively by the Member States:** this is a necessary and sensible investment in the future, in both ecological and economic terms.

The DNR feels that the **compromise**, that fortunately was adopted end of February by the European Parliament⁴, is a success

for nature conservation, albeit with some painful compromises. It is the first broad European Nature Restoration Law. It addresses all ecosystems - on land and in the sea, inside and outside protected areas. We believe that with this law, **we are living up to the commitments** we made as Europeans when we signed the Global Biodiversity Framework⁵ in Montreal. The **European Union** is economically strong, so we **must lead the way** and show that we can do business without harming nature. The **law offers the Member States the flexibility** to take their own paths towards meeting the targets.

The law needs to be flanked by significant and reliable additional funding at EU Level. In addition, existing funding pots must be aligned with the law's objectives. This is crucial for the law to be implemented swiftly and fairly and for it to be accepted by the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors. After all, the principle of voluntary action without incentives has rarely worked in the past.

Regrettably, the **European Commission recently started going backwards** when it comes to protecting our natural resources: environmental standards in agriculture are being watered down and the Regulation on the sustainable use of pesticides⁶ has been dropped. Given the biodiversity and climate crisis, **we need to be bolder** – we mustn't start giving up. More than 80% of Europe's protected habitats are already in a poor state and we must live up to our fine promises. The Nature Restoration Law is a last ditch opportunity to do this. Today, we decide what our environment and the future of our children and grandchildren will look like.



© Marion Carniel, Shutterstock

1. Deutscher Naturschutzring, <https://www.dnr.de/>

2. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/lqFDVgf>

3. European Commission, Questions and answers on Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/lxXwp6X>

4. European Parliament, Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea, <https://europa.eu/lvvFjn4>

5. United Nations, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, https://www.unep.org/resources/kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity-framework?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAxaCvBhBaEiwAvsLmWGILov6xNeE0tsDUprY5jiTspAZ4E4W6ffu0jGP11G-5M7Bnra8V5hoCtigQAvD_BwE

6. European Commission, Sustainable use of pesticides, <https://europa.eu/lCjrmHJ>

The spring of our discontent



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Stoyan Tchoukanov © EESC

Farmers across Europe are protesting on the streets as they struggle to make a living and become more and more dependent on subsidies. **Restoring the ecosystem is key to combatting climate change and biodiversity loss and reducing risks to food security.** However, the farmer communities need a long-term solution to accompany the green transition, as well as **reciprocity of standards on the global market** in order to preserve the European model of farming that delivers the highest quality products to the table.

The way the EU is subsidising food production today is not only wrong, in that it funds some environmentally destroying production

systems and unsuitable practices, **but it is also wholly unsustainable**, as it exacerbates the dependency on political decisions and endangers the EU's competitiveness and strategic autonomy. At the same time, signing trade agreements or granting third countries that do not respect the same environmental and social standards access to the single market is even more senseless and fuels discontent among farmers. If the EU steps back from the current subsidy system, it has to add another economic incentive that allows farmers to shift towards more sustainable and healthy practices, but that also **ensures a better and fair distribution of profits along the entire agri-food supply chain.**

Scientists and experts have all agreed that farmers and fishers would benefit in the long term from improved agricultural ecosystems. **Farmers and forest owners cannot, however, be expected to bear the costs of protecting biodiversity.** Providing this 'public good and public value' should become a useful source of income for them. This is why sufficient

funding needs to be made available to offset the financial losses that land users will incur, and to ensure this strategy is a success. It is also why the legislation on nature restoration¹ needs to be implemented through an open, transparent and inclusive process, so that farmers can embark on national restoration plans and detail how they intend to achieve their targets. **The principle of proportionality of measures (fair distribution of burdens and costs, but also of benefits) between the various stakeholders must be ensured. The EESC therefore calls for the creation of a European fund dedicated to biodiversity**² and to exploring new ways for the various EU policies (Common Agricultural Policy, energy, housing, transport, etc.) to help achieve the binding objectives of the regulation on nature restoration.



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1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/lqFDVgf>

2. EESC, opinion NAT/841, <https://europa.eu/lC36TY7>

Saving the Nature Restoration Law requires us to revisit the basics of economics



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Corina Murafa © EESC

In the intricate dance of policy-making, the saying 'There is no such thing as a free lunch' resonates profoundly in the unfolding saga of the [Nature Restoration law](#) (NRL)¹. Farmers' protests and the looming [European elections](#)² complicated the Council and Parliament's quest for a final agreement on the regulation.

The current package leaves crucial questions unanswered about the cost of this 'lunch' and

who bears it. Yet, within this uncertainty, the proposed law presents a golden opportunity to simultaneously restore nature and reshape key sectors of our economies. **There is no food system we can talk of without healthy biodiversity – the dire state of our pollinators being just one point in case.**

Before envisioning the successful implementation of the Nature Restoration Law, a strategic three-step approach is imperative. Firstly, it is necessary to quantify early on who stands to lose from the restoration targets. Secondly, there should be proactive engagement with these stakeholders, fostering open discussions about concerns and expectations. Thirdly, financial mechanisms should be designed to cushion the impact, which would encourage an embrace of the NRL, rather than opposition.

The shift from monocultures to biodiverse agriculture emerges as a triple victory, benefiting farmers, consumers and nature. To navigate this paradigm shift, a deep dive into the economic landscape is essential. As economists have been preaching for decades, **Member States must tax negative externalities while rewarding positive ones.**

Though the proposed law claims a hands-off approach compared to other policies like the Common Agricultural Policy ([CAP](#)³) and Common fisheries policy ([CFP](#)⁴), or the Emissions Trading System ([ETS](#)⁵), economic common sense dictates a holistic examination of systemic effects and feedback loops of all these policies. We must dispel the illusion of a 'free lunch' and embrace instead a comprehensive policy approach.

1. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/!qFDVgf>
2. European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
3. European Commission, CAP, <https://europa.eu/!xcCxFN>
4. European Commission, CFP, <https://europa.eu/!CG3ymb>
5. European Commission, ETS, <https://europa.eu/!DFxVFj>

The ongoing judicialisation of the countryside



Edwin MICHIELS
Policy Lead on Nature, Climate & Energy, [LTO Nederland](#)¹

Edwin Michiels © Dirk Hol

Since the announcement of the proposal for a [Nature Restoration Law](#)² [LTO](#) has indicated that it is **firmly in favour of restoring and preserving nature, but not in this way**, which will lead to further judicialisation of the countryside and will put increasing pressure on rural communities.

Furthermore, [LTO](#) finds it worrying that yet another European regulation is going to be adopted while the **consequences for the Member States have not been mapped yet**. In the Netherlands, an impact assessment was carried out by the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen – but its conclusions were not shared with Dutch MEPs and MPs prior to the vote in the European Parliament³. As a result, the consequences and limitations of this law for Dutch agriculture, and the rest of the Netherlands, **will only become clear in practice** later: when the obligations to which the Netherlands now commits will further lock up all kinds of societal activities in the Netherlands. Moreover, Dutch MEPs were forced to vote on a proposal whose

impact on the Netherlands was not yet clear. As far as [LTO](#) is concerned, this is **unacceptable and incompatible with the existing goals** for making agriculture more sustainable and the need to keep rural areas attractive to young people and especially for young farmers.

A majority of the **Dutch parliament** shares our concerns. They recently passed a resolution which urges the Dutch government to vote against the Nature Restoration Law in the Council of the European Union. The rationale behind this is that **failure to meet the objectives** which are included in the proposal **could have serious legal consequences** later on. With the lessons of the nitrogen crisis in the Netherlands⁴ in mind, it is irresponsible to lay down new targets without having clarity about their judicial consequences. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether heavily urbanised and densely populated areas can fulfil newly laid out targets at all.

[LTO](#) does not ignore the fact that nature restoration can and will make **positive social contributions**, especially for farmers who depend on, and cooperate with, nature. According to the World Economic Forum for instance, the largest economic sectors, such as the agricultural sector, are heavily

dependent on nature. Additionally, the European Commission has always said that 'every 1 euro invested in nature restoration adds 8 to 38 euros in benefits'. However, it is important to look at the **distribution of costs and benefits**. Farmers cannot be held responsible for the costs for nature restoration while the benefits benefit society as a whole. Hence, [LTO](#) believes that governments, private organisations and society are all integral parts of the solution and thus are responsible for co-financing nature restoration and the long-term maintenance of nature and natural resources. In this light, it is difficult to understand and explain that the European Commission only has to present an overview of available financial resources one year after the entry into force of the regulation. [LTO](#) believes that **newly laid out targets for nature restoration, with far-reaching legal consequences, cannot be implemented without having sufficient and robust financial instruments to do so.**



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1. Agriculture and Horticulture Organisation (LTO) Netherlands, <https://www.lto.nl/>
2. European Commission, Nature restoration law, <https://europa.eu/!qFDVgf>
3. European Parliament, Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea, <https://europa.eu/!vvFJn4>
4. European Commission, The Netherlands Nitrogen crisis, presentation Jan Willem Erisman, <https://europa.eu/!rTg6Hb>

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

EU must uphold its credibility by fulfilling its commitments to candidate countries



Ionuț Sibian © EESC

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Board Member, Orange
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The European Economic and Social Committee has consistently championed the enlargement process of the European Union, emphasising its significance in fostering peace, stability, security and socio-economic development throughout the continent. In various adopted opinions and declarations, as well as through joint meetings with partners, the EESC has underscored the importance of EU enlargement as a geostrategic investment.

Central to the EESC's stance is the belief that the EU must uphold its credibility by fulfilling its commitments to candidate countries. The enlargement of the EU is less about dates and

more about credibility and delivery from both sides. The EESC leads by example in gradually integrating candidate countries into EU structures.

During its February plenary session, the EESC launched a pioneering initiative, the **Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs¹)**, to engage civil society representatives from candidate countries in its regular activities. The response has been overwhelming, with nearly 600 social partners and civil society organisations expressing interest. Selected participants will contribute their expertise to relevant opinions, ensuring their perspectives are incorporated into decision-making processes.

Moreover, the EESC emphasises the vital role of organised civil society in the enlargement process. Civil society organisations serve as intermediaries between politics and citizens, monitoring the implementation of fundamental principles such as freedom of expression, the rule of law and the fight against corruption. Bilateral bodies established between the EESC and candidate countries act as watchdogs, ensuring

adherence to accession criteria.

In collaboration with partners from the Western Balkans, the EESC facilitates joint consultative committees to address civil society concerns during accession negotiations. Similar platforms, called civil society platforms, are established with 'the Association trio' – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – to oversee the accession process comprehensively².

In conclusion, the EESC remains committed to promoting European values and engaging civil society in EU enlargement negotiations. Through inclusive initiatives and collaborative platforms, it strives to ensure that the enlargement process reflects the interests and aspirations of all stakeholders involved.



Ionuț Sibian was one of the speakers at this workshop during the EESC's 2024 Civil Society Week

1. EESC, ECMs press release, <https://europa.eu/!FGp3MM>

2. EESC, Section for External Relations, section bodies, <https://europa.eu/!G38Cy6>

REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on the upcoming elections: A Cooperative Europe in the Making



Susanne Westhausen

Susanne WESTHAUSEN
President, Cooperatives
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With the [European elections](#)² just a few months away, it is crucial to reflect on

what is at stake amidst the myriad challenges and opportunities that we are currently facing. From meeting our objectives of carbon-neutrality by 2050 and rejuvenating social cohesion to fostering democracy and stability in our neighbouring countries, it is quite clear that these elections will not be a routine democratic exercise; they come at a **decisive moment** and will affect Europe's future trajectory.

But it is still possible to reverse the negative trends. It is imperative to **empower Europeans at grassroots level**, whether it be through cooperatives, community projects or educational initiatives. We must make sure that what happens at European level is collectively endorsed and supported.



In this light, the European cooperative movement is putting forward a vision for the upcoming legislative term that is clear: we expect a strong political commitment to the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)³ and ambitious leadership in implementing the [Social Economy Action Plan](#)⁴ up to 2030. However, the **values underpinning these initiatives must spread to the economic sphere** as well: we need a radical change in the EU's economic governance and Member States' budgetary

policies in order to bind them to the Pillar's principles and move beyond mere financial value creation with, for instance, recognition of the social returns on investment. This approach could support more resilient, community-centred and sustainable organisations like cooperatives and recognise their positive impact – as civil society – on social cohesion, democracy and citizen empowerment.

Equally important is our **commitment to education**. We expect the next term to focus firmly on skills after the 2023 [European Year of Skills](#)⁵. At the European Social Economy Conference in Liège in February⁶, the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU⁷ emphasised the **need for a new higher education degree in social economy**. This response resonates with the efforts we made in the [SE4Ces project](#)⁸ and reinforces [our recent plea](#)⁹ for EU policy-makers to better incorporate alternative and cooperative models into entrepreneurship education and flagship programmes.

These elections might very well turn into a vote of confidence in European governance. Now, more than ever, we need to encourage

trust and transparency to cope with political fragmentation and the democratic challenges of 2024 and onwards. As we move closer to election day, **let us unite under a shared vision of Europe:** a Europe with strong civil

society, a Europe where business thrives while ensuring climate and social justice, a Europe based on cooperation, dialogue and citizen leadership.



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1. Cooperatives Europe, <https://coopseurope.coop/>
2. European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
3. European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1226&langId=en>
4. European Commission, Social Economy Action Plan, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1537&langId=en>
5. European Union, European Year of Skills, https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en
6. European Social Economy Meeting, <https://socialeconomy2024.eu/en/>
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8. Social Economy 4Ces, <https://socialeconomy4ces.auth.gr/news/se4ces-final-event-educating-the-next-generation-of-social-entrepreneurs>
9. Cooperatives Europe, Call for Inclusion of Cooperative Business Models in European Education Initiatives, <https://coopseurope.coop/publication/call-for-the-inclusion-of-cooperative-business-models-in-european-education-initiatives/>

MEMBERS IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Sif Holst is elected as President of the EESC Ad Hoc Group on Equality¹



Sif Holst © EESC

Sif HOLST (DK)
Vice-President, Civil
Society Organisations'
Group
Vice-Chair, Disabled
People's Organisations
Denmark

Professional background

I have been involved in civil society organisations since childhood, from scouts to international exchange programmes to disability organisations. For the past 19 years I have worked as a global-south development consultant, an organisational consultant, a political consultant and now as vice-chair for various disability organisations.

Motivation for this Presidency

Continually striving for equality, or more precisely for equity, is the common thread running through all my work. We should all have equal opportunities to be part of society and, when it comes to the EESC, Members should be involved in the different areas of work and utilise our knowledge and skills. To that end, the current obstacles must be reduced.

To gather information about the obstacles experienced by Members, I suggested carrying out a survey when I served as the vice-president of EESC Ad Hoc Group on Equality in 2020-2023. Though the results were fairly positive, they also showed room for improvement. I

would like to follow up on those results and contribute to change.

My vision is: to achieve greater equality in the Committee and to support the Committee's equality work; to avoid study groups, or debate panels, that only consist of men (or of women); to represent the diversity of civil society in all our work; to improve our work through different insights; and to eliminate the current feeling that things might be easier for those who have a specific gender, come from certain countries or speak another language. We need more data, more inspiration from the other EU institutions and further discussions of the existing barriers. We also need to support the appointment and welcoming of new members.

1. The objective of the Ad-hoc Group on Equality (AHGE) is to work to establish a cross-cutting culture of equality within the EESC by implementing all aspects of the principle of equality, and particularly gender equality.

NEWS FROM THE GROUP

Follow-up meeting on the Open Letter #EUCivilDialogueNow

On 29 February, **Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC and Gabriella Civico, President of Civil Society Europe, met Ambassador **Willem van de Voorde**, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the EU, to follow up on the #EUCivilDialogueNow [open letter](#)¹, sent by European civil society on 24 January to the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Its 156 signatories from 26 Member States urge the three main institutions of the European Union (EU) involved in EU decision-making to **take concrete measures to implement an open, transparent and regular dialogue**

with civil society organisations, as set out in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union, in all policy areas².

Besides this joint open letter, initiated by the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC and Civil Society Europe³, the EESC has recently adopted in its February plenary session, an opinion on [Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward](#)⁴.

On 25 March, the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC will organise a conference on [Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward](#)⁵ to present these two initiatives, where Ambassador van de Voorde has kindly agreed to speak at.

More information and webstreaming: <https://europa.eu/lpjkVBb>



From left to right: Ambassador Willem van de Voorde, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the EU, Gabriella Civico, President of Civil Society Europe and Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC © EESC

1. EESC, Open letter: European Institutions must recognise, involve and support Civil society as part of a structured Civil Dialogue, <https://europa.eu/lyG8b6t>
2. Treaty of the European Union TEU, Art. 11, <https://europa.eu/ltqBrmv>
3. Civil Society Europe, <https://civilsocietyeuropa.eu/>
4. EESC opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/!7P7qXw>
5. EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!pjkVBb>

Members' participation in the Civil Society Week¹

From 4 to 7 March, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held its first ever Civil Society Week, titled 'Rise Up For Democracy!'. This week-long event brought to Brussels more than 200 citizens' organisations and stakeholders from across Europe (including youth organisations, NGOs and journalists) to

discuss the state of democracy, the challenges it faces, and the vital role civil society plays ahead of the [EU elections](#)², drawing up demands for the next EU leaders.

Several Members from the Civil Society Organisations' Group intervened as speakers in

two of its five major initiatives: the [Civil Society Days](#)³ workshops and the [Journalists' Seminar](#)⁴.

Read more about the Civil Society Week at: <https://europa.eu/!tMGndD>



Séamus Boland
President of
the Civil Society
Organisations'
Group:

Séamus Boland © EESC

"Participatory mechanisms in politics must not degrade into tick-box exercises. EU Civil Society can help prevent that by raising awareness, acting as watchdogs and empowering citizens. The prerequisite is a safe and enabling space for them."



Sif Holst
Vice-President of
the Civil Society
Organisations'
Group:

Sif Holst © EESC

"If you have the right to vote and the chance to do so, take that opportunity to vote for a united, democratic, competitive, sustainable and social European Union."



Pietro Barbieri
Vice-President of
the Civil Society
Organisations'
Group:

Pietro Barbieri © EESC

"Civil dialogue is the way forward to fill democracy with meaning, to make citizens' voice heard, starting from the most vulnerable, to give greater opportunities for the implementation of EU acts. In short, to counter populism at its roots."

1. EESC Civil Society Week, <https://europa.eu/!jyMwhP>
2. European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
3. EESC Civil Society Days, <https://europa.eu/!KqfQgk>
4. EESC Journalists' Seminar, <https://europa.eu/!YCqPv3>

The social economy - the economy of tomorrow

A delegation of the EESC's Social Economy Category takes part in the European Social Economy Meeting related to the Belgian Presidency



**Justyna Kalina
OCHĘDZAN (PL)**
Co-Spokesperson,
EESC Social Economy
Category¹
President, Greater
Poland Coordinating
Council – Union of
Non-governmental
Organisations

Justyna Kalina Ochędzan
© EESC

On 12 and 13 February in Liège², Belgium, 600 people discussed the social economy and its increasing role in a changing world and Europe. Transformation and the social economy, presented as the economy of change and the economy of tomorrow, was the main topic discussed in plenary sessions, workshops and study visits, which some Members of the EESC's Social Economy Category - including me - had the chance to attend.. In the socio-economic field, the social economy is not a well-known or

widely implemented way of thinking about the relationship between citizens, the market and profit. A social economy mindset is different than the free-market one, where economic freedom, open competition for customers and maximising profit from sales are measures of success. The human-centred economy, which is the social economy, is focused on creating a relationship between society's needs and the affordable social services market.

The social economy at the core of transitions

Times of transition that, in the EU's case, are rooted in long-term strategic thinking in both the green and digital fields also require thinking in terms of inclusive transformation, as stated by one of the panellists, Nadine Richez-Battesti, a researcher from Aix-Marseille University and LEST-CNRS³. Inclusive transformation consists of three elements: responding to the risk of social exclusion and striving for greater social justice; accepting the coexistence of

diverse forms of entrepreneurship, including those that are innovative or not obvious; and highlighting the role and importance of democratic processes and multi-stakeholder engagement as a form of collective work and cooperation. Therefore, the social economy and its paradigms can clearly be seen as natural in times of change and transformation.

Another important element of the conference

was the adoption of the [Liège Roadmap for Social Economy in the European Union](#)⁴, as it highlighted the importance of the social economy in the political agenda. The conference, held under the Belgian Presidency, was another important step in building awareness that times of transition call for particular social sensitivity and greater openness to alternative forms of economy that work for people.

1. EESC Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UK>
2. The social economy at the core of transitions meeting, Liège, Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, <https://socialeconomy2024.eu/en/>
3. Institute of Labour Economics and Industrial Sociology (LEST): Mixed Research Unit of the CNRS and of the Aix-Marseille University, <https://emes.net/institutional-members/lest/>
4. Liège Roadmap for Social Economy in the European Union, https://socialeconomy2024.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LiegeRoadmap-SocialEconomy-3-final_propre.pdf

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

EU ambitions and budget need to align with citizens' concerns

At the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) plenary session on 14 February 2024, Members held a debate on the [European Commission work programme and priorities for 2024](#)¹ with **Maroš Šefčovič**, European Commission Executive Vice-President for European Green Deal, Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight.

The Commission's top priority for 2024 is to **ensure that Europe recovers**, while taking account of economic and social aspects. The main objective will be to mitigate the harmful impact of the war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis. Against this backdrop, EESC President **Oliver Röpke** pointed out that the Committee's opinions had highlighted a number of factors that were key for recovering from the crises and making the EU more resilient. These included sustainable growth, social convergence, a favourable business environment, better employment conditions and focusing on social and economic upward convergence, while leaving no one behind.

Mr Šefčovič stressed the Commission's determination to **reduce the administrative burden by 25%** on people and companies in the EU – due to reporting requirements – without undermining the Commission's policy objectives. "In 2024, we are also continuing our efforts to further the green transition and properly implement the [Green Deal](#)², while preserving the competitiveness of our industry and ensuring a transition which is socially fair, just and inclusive," Mr Šefčovič said, mentioning the need to work closely with and talk to all stakeholders, including farmers.



Séamus Boland © EESC

The President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, **Séamus Boland**, reminded the Executive Vice-President of the findings of the **Eurobarometer survey**, carried out six months before the European elections. The survey had revealed **five topics** that citizens would like the new European Parliament to address as a matter of **priority**:

- the fight against poverty and social exclusion
- public health
- action against climate change

- support to the economy and the creation of new jobs and
- democracy and the rule of law.

Mr Boland questioned whether the Commission's priorities were fully in line with those topics and said: "We

believe non-alignment in any one of them is dangerous, particularly in these populist times. The EU must connect and reach out to citizens in every possible way to hear what they have to say and to stem the disconnect between institutions and people". Moreover, the EU's [multiannual financial framework](#)³ needed to be aligned with the EU's ambitions.



Elena Calistru © EESC

Several other Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group took the floor. **Elena Calistru** wondered how the European Commission could successfully counter arguments from populists and extremists who were challenging both the Green Deal and the way in which the EU has managed to allocate funds in this area. She asked how the EU could ensure fiscal transparency and make budgetary deliberations more inclusive. Investments needed to be sustainable and reflect common values.



Luca Jahier © EESC

In his intervention, **Luca Jahier** addressed, amongst other things, the provisional political agreement on the proposed reform of the EU's economic governance framework⁴. "We welcome the agreement and also the last-minute inclusion of more flexibility on investment, including social investment, but we also know that the Member States' fiscal space will remain far from enough to support



Debate on the Commission work programme and priorities for 2024, with Maroš Šefčovič © EESC

the massive investment needed in the core four priorities of climate change, digital, energy security and defence," he said. In terms of EU economic governance, a lot of work needed to be done, keeping in mind the key challenges raised in the Commission's annual [strategic foresight](#)⁵ report.



Simo Tiainen © EESC

Simo Tiainen, Vice-President of the Group, said that the European Green Deal and its objectives should be supported. Given the problems with implementation, he lamented: "The Commission has been too hasty. It has not observed the practical impacts of its proposals and has ignored the different conditions in Member States". As an example, Mr Tiainen mentioned the new law to fight global deforestation and forest degradation⁶ that has already stopped milk producers' investments in his country – Finland – for almost two years.



Alessandro Mostaccio © EESC

For a stronger Europe in the world, Member States needed to complete the Union's institutional and constitutional integration, argued **Alessandro Mostaccio**. "We need to speed up the integration process amongst Member States, creating a Federation of States. That's the only way we will achieve the international political legitimacy and credibility that we need," he said.

1. European Commission, Commission work programme 2024, <https://europa.eu/INR7MCF>

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

3. European Commission, 2021-2027 long-term EU budget & NextGenerationEU, <https://europa.eu/!w8hX47>

4. Consilium, Economic governance review: Council and Parliament strike deal on reform of fiscal rules, <https://europa.eu/!dDm8pC>

5. European Commission, Strategic foresight, <https://europa.eu/!YRTtPt>

6. European Commission, press release, <https://europa.eu/!nDhMbR>

Civil society has a vital role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations (UN) and the European Union must work together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs¹), and civil society plays a pivotal role in this. That was the conclusion of the EESC plenary debate on the **implementation of the SDGs** in February. **Tatiana Molcean**, Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), was a key speaker in the debate.

According to the [5th Europe Sustainable Development Report \(ESDR\)](#)² drawn up by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and SDSN Europe, at its current pace the EU will not even meet a third of the SDG targets by 2030. The report shows that progress on environmental goals and social targets has stalled and even reversed in many European countries. There are increasing challenges in terms of access to and quality of universal services, poverty and material deprivation, driven at least partly by the multiple crises that have hit Europe since 2020.

In her address, **Tatiana Molcean** therefore highlighted the urgency of the situation and called for **decisive action to address this stagnation and reversal**, particularly in areas such as social targets and environmental sustainability. "There are no custom-made solutions, but we know for sure that civil society's role in accelerating implementation of the SDGs is crucial. In this period of shrinking civic space in many countries, efforts must be renewed to ensure the right to participate with meaningful engagement," she said.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** flagged the importance of policy coherence and meaningful engagement with civil society. He called for concerted efforts to speed up progress towards meeting the SDGs. "Slapping our logo on more papers isn't the answer," he said. "We need to change the policies. We are ready to play our role."

Several Members of the EESC's Civil Society



Baiba Miltoviča © EESC

Organisations' Group took the floor. Linked to SDG 1 – *No poverty* – **Baiba Miltoviča**, president of the Committee's TEN section³, reiterated the EESC's call for social and holistic measures to **combat energy poverty**, recognising the role of renovation of buildings and of companies and SMEs in ensuring access to energy services. She pledged that the section would continue its work on energy affordability.



Arnaud Schwarz © EESC

Arnaud Schwarz said that the EU and Member States' progress on the SDGs was too slow. The rhetoric of transformative and participatory change remained just that. Civil society organisations were trying to enforce the rights established in the [Aarhus Convention](#)⁴ but it was increasingly difficult. The incoming European Parliament and European Commission needed to show where the EU's strategy and actions to deliver on the [2030 agenda](#)⁵ were.

Juraj Sipko said that finance was key in the response to systemic shocks that hit more often and deeper. However, not all 195 nations in the United Nations were ready to support a carbon price or a carbon tax, and in addition interest rates were very high, slowing down economic growth. As the consequence



Juraj Sipko © EESC

is that there is **not enough money to finance the implementation of the SDGs**, Mr Sipko asked the UN representative: "How will we create the conditions that will enable us to finance the SDGs in the future? Does the UN have any plan to set up an emergency fund to provide the resources for all countries in the world to face climate change?"



Ileana Izverniceanu De La Iglesia © EESC

Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia said that **consumer organisations** want to and can help implement the SDGs, if they are not forgotten and if they are supported. These organisations have an important role to play in raising awareness among consumers: "Consumer associations can provide information on eco-friendly products, fair trade options and ethical business practices, encouraging consumers to support companies that align with the SDGs." They also carry out advocacy and enforcement, and even push for legislative programmes.



Debate on the role of civil society in the implementation of the SDGs, with Tatiana Molcean, Under-Secretary General of the UN © EESC

1. United Nations, The 17 goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

2. Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/2024, <https://eu-dashboards.sdgindex.org/chapters>

3. EESC, Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and Information Society, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>

4. European Commission, The Aarhus Convention and the EU, <https://europa.eu/!fYvdnn>

5. United Nations, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

Enlargement: 131 representatives from nine EU candidate countries will join the advisory work of the EESC

On 15 February at its plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) **officially launched its initiative to welcome civil society representatives from EU candidate countries. A total of 131 'Enlargement Candidate Members' (ECM)¹ were selected to make up the pool of civil society experts who will be participating**

in the Committee's work, thus making the EESC the first institution to open its doors to EU candidate countries. The initiative sets new standards for involving candidate countries in EU activities, helping them integrate progressively and tangibly into the EU.

The initiative was warmly welcomed by European Commission Vice-President **Věra Jourová**, the Prime Minister of Montenegro, **Milojko Spajić**, and the Prime Minister of Albania, **Edi Rama**, who were attending the event. They were joined by civil society representatives from nine EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina,



Krzysztof Balon © EESC

Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine).

As a civil society gateway, the EESC is determined to support and empower civil society, not only in the EU but also in candidate countries on their way to freedom, democracy, economic and social prosperity and – ultimately – closer integration. As the momentum for enlargement picked up in 2023, it was crucial to take this cooperation one step further.

Several Members from the Civil Society Organisations' Group took the floor during the debate.

Krzysztof Balon, Vice-President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, stressed that working together with colleagues from Ukraine and other EU candidate countries is important for their accession to the EU, but also a sign of confidence in the victory over the Russian aggression.



Lidija Pavić-Rogošić © EESC



Andris Gobiņš © EESC

Andris Gobiņš emphasised that having civil society from Ukraine and other candidate countries in the core of EU enlargement is pivotal for mutual understanding and better decisions. The EESC is leading by example and showing how to strengthen European unity and democracy in practice. Others are to follow.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić, Vice-President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, echoed her pride in this initiative. Not only is the EESC the first institute to include civil society representatives from candidate countries in its actual work, giving them the opportunity to gain experience, but it is also the first to receive relevant contributions from them to its work in different areas.



Athanasios Ioannidis © EESC

Athanasios Ioannidis asked Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, about the [Freddy Belleris case](#)¹, raising the issue of potential violations of Albania's Criminal

Procedure Law. Mr Rama replied that no one in Albania was above the law, whether rich or poor, politician or ordinary citizen, Greek citizen or not. That it is a matter for the Albanian justice system and that justice would answer in the end.



Debate on the Enlargement Candidate Members' initiative, with Oliver Röpké, EESC President, Edi Rama, PM of Albania, Miloško Spajić, PM of Montenegro and Vera Jourová, EU Commissioner © EESC

1. EESC Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative, <https://europa.eu/1J9MjPm>.

2. Freddy Belleris case, NE Global, <https://www.neglobal.eu/the-beleri-case-as-bellwether-for-democracy-in-albania/>.

EESC calls for citizen participation in EU policymaking to be increased

At its February plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) also held a debate on **Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU**, with Commission Vice-President and Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, **Dubravka Šuica**.

In this debate, linked to the adoption of the EESC opinion on [Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward](#)¹, the EESC called for a strategy on civil dialogue as a first step towards strengthening the role of civil society and **increasing citizen participation in EU policymaking**. This is necessary for the legitimacy of EU policies, which is particularly important in the run-up to the European elections².

The rapporteur for the opinion, EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group Vice-President **Pietro Barbieri**, stressed that at present in the EU civic space is shrinking and citizens and civil society organisations have less opportunities to actively engage in political life.

There is an urgent need to step up the implementation of Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)³, which states that: "The institutions shall maintain an **open, transparent and regular** dialogue with representative associations and society." "The EESC's commitment shows that action cannot be avoided or postponed", Mr Barbieri said.

Several Members of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group took the floor. President **Séamus Boland**, emphasised that growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions are a threat to EU democracy. More structured EU Civil Dialogue can increase its resilience.

"The [Open letter](#)⁴ that the Civil Society Organisations' Group published on #EUCivilDialogueNow reflects the efforts of our Group in this regard and it is very much in line with the recommendations of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)⁵. The EU needs to reform the way it works, by better involving social partners and organised civil society at large, and to increase citizens' participation and youth involvement", Mr. Boland said.



Justyna Ochędzan © EESC



Debate on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU with Dubravka Šuica, VP of the European Commission © EESC

involvement, and more participation at all levels: local, regional, national and European, especially now, in these times of wars and growing radicalism. When democracy is under pressure, there is a need for new solutions, as strong democracies demand open, transparent and regular civil and social dialogue, in all policy areas.



Christian Moos © EESC

Christian Moos draw the attention to the fact that most EU citizens are engaged in civil society organisations. Their representation of legitimate

interests as watchdogs is crucial for human rights, freedoms and the rule of law, and indispensable for the checks and balances of liberal democracies. “We therefore count on the EU institutions to create more structured, ongoing dialogue with civil society networks and organisations, harnessing the EESC’s key contribution”.

Ágnes Cser underlined the need to bring citizens closer to the EU, and for the Commission



Ágnes Cser © EESC

to take the EESC recommendations more into account.

Finally, **Andreas Kruse** reiterated the importance of civil society initiatives for defending, preserving and strengthening democracy. Political institutions must therefore contribute



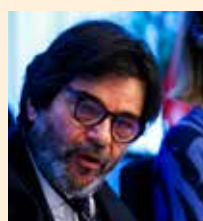
Andreas Kruse © EESC

to the sustainability of these initiatives with supporting measures to prevent or hinder the rise of right-wing extremist movements.

1. EESC opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/!7P7gXw>
2. European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
3. Treaty on European Union TEU, Art. 11, <https://europa.eu/!tgBrmv>
4. EESC, Open letter: European Institutions must recognise, involve and support Civil society as part of a structured Civil Dialogue, <https://europa.eu/!yG8b6t>
5. European Commission, Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://europa.eu/!CNwFyK>

WHAT IS EESC OPINION SOC/782 ALL ABOUT?

An interview with Pietro Barbieri, rapporteur for the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) opinion SOC/782 on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward¹



Pietro Barbieri © EESC

The opinion was presented and adopted at the February plenary session in 2024.

Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT)

Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group

Former Spokesperson, Forum Terzo Settore (Third Sector Forum)

President, Centre for Autonomy (Centro per l’Autonomia)

What is the main finding of this opinion?

This is a very important step for the Committee and civil society organisations. The discussion was heated and touched the interests and aims of the individual representations and the very nature of the Committee. In short, it was an effort that first and foremost in its

method concerned how to build civil dialogue in concrete and institutional operational terms. The process introduced is therefore the objective of the opinion: procedures, objectives, listening to each other, agenda and shared languages. At a time when populism

can essentially exaggerate representative democracy, making it out to be illiberal, it is key to involve the backbone of European society as a bastion for reaffirming and relaunching the European democratic link.

How could these issues be addressed? What are the three main recommendations or proposals of the opinion?

As regards this methodology, the opinion contains three clear objectives to be achieved: a precise strategy that can take into account the links between the European institutions

and the aforementioned methodology; a subsequent Action Plan that will set out the strategy’s timing and deadlines, including citizens’ panels; an interinstitutional agreement

with the aim of implementing the strategy in each European institution. Obviously, a monitoring and reporting facility has to be present too.

After the adoption of this opinion, what have you done/will you do to promote it?

This opinion has been requested by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union². Clearly, that has to be the starting point: the role of the European Council is central in defining the EU’s overall political guidelines and priorities. Every effort is being made to get civil dialogue onto the agenda

of the Council. There is also a substantial EESC Civil Society Organisations’ Group initiative vis-a-vis the Commission, the European Parliament and the Belgian Presidency, our Open letter on #EUCivilDialogueNow³. Overall, this endeavour must be made at the highest levels of the Committee and European civil society

organisations, going beyond the European elections themselves.

Read the EESC opinion on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward at: <https://europa.eu/!7P7gXw>

1. EESC opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/!7P7gXw>
2. Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>
3. Joint open letter from the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group and Civil Society Europe #EUCivilDialogueNow: <https://europa.eu/!8bMbpK>

OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 14 and 15 February 2024. The EESC plenary adopted 11 opinions of which 5 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), rapporteur, [CCMI/213](#)¹ Towards a comprehensive strategy for the EU wood industry

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO), rapporteur, [ECO/634](#)² Annual Sustainable Growth Survey 2024

Krzysztof Stanisław BALON (PL), rapporteur, [ECO/635](#)³ Improving benchmarks and reporting requirements in financial services and investment support

Krzysztof Stanisław BALON (PL), rapporteur, [SOC/781](#)⁴ Digitalisation in social security

Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT), rapporteur, [SOC/782](#)⁵ Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's [website](#)⁶.

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 24 and 25 April. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our [website](#)⁷.

A list including all new work appointments of Civil Society Organisations' Group Members is available on the Committee's [website](#)⁸.

1. EESC opinion CCMI/213, <https://europa.eu/I4CTvgC>
2. EESC opinion ECO/634, <https://europa.eu/IYWKbCT>
3. EESC opinion ECO/635, <https://europa.eu/I4nyg46>
4. EESC opinion SOC/781, <https://europa.eu/I4wJvTk>
5. EESC opinion SOC/782, <https://europa.eu/I7P7gXw>
6. EESC opinions, <https://europa.eu/IwF86wY>
7. EESC plenary sessions, <https://europa.eu/ITKChb8>
8. EESC, New work appointments, <https://europa.eu/IqCj7dY>

UPCOMING EVENTS



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25/03: Conference on "Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward" by the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group

08/04: Partnership event on "2023 Poverty Watch Report Launch: Unsustainable Welfare States and Risk of Austerity", co-organised by the EAPN and the Civil Society Organisations' Group

16/04: Conference "Building Together the EU we want" by the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group

Information and webstreams at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/members-groups/groups/civil-society-organisations-group/events>

Join the conference on 'Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward'

The **conference** on Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward will explore how the EU as a whole and Member States individually can **work towards effective sustainable civil dialogue and participatory democracy**.

In its plenary session on 14-15 February, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted an **opinion** on *Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward* (SOC/782), requested by the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU. In parallel, the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group and Civil Society Europe published an **open letter**, which received the support of 156 signatories from 26 EU Member States.

The banner features a close-up of a hand holding a silver microphone. In the top right corner is the logo of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Civil Society Organisations' Group. Below the logo, the word "Conference" is written in green. The main title of the conference is "Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward" in bold black text. Below the title, the date and time are listed: "25/03/2024 | 14.30 - 18.00 CET | EESC | JDE62 & online". In the bottom right corner, there are social media handles: "@CSOGGroupEESC", "#EUCivilDialogueNow", and "#EUDemocracy".

The letter calls on the main EU institutions to take concrete measures to implement open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations in all policy areas.

The conference will **present these two initiatives** to institutional stakeholders and a wider audience and reflect on ways to

implement the measures.

The conference will bring together Members of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, policymakers and civil society organisations. Our **guest speakers** will include **Pedro Silva Pereira**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, responsible for replacing the

President, Roberta Metsola, for contact with civil society organisations representing citizens, and **Ambassador Willem van de Voorde**, **Permanent Representative of Belgium to the EU**

More information and live webstream: [here](#)

Take part in the Group conference focusing on the European elections

The conference on ***Building Together the EU We Want*** will take place on **16 April in Brussels**. It will bring together approximately 140 participants, including the Members of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group and representatives from European and national civil society organisations. The discussions will centre around three topics:

- The expectations of European citizens vis-à-vis the socio-economic and political challenges facing the EU;
- The EU we want: a democratic and inclusive EU of social justice and protection;
- The EU we want: a sustainable economy based on fair green and digital transitions and quality jobs.

The event will assemble speakers from a significant number of European civil society networks, who will contribute in a round table format. A keynote speech will be given by Jannis Emmanouilides, Deputy Chief Executive of the European Policy Centre (EPC) and Director of Studies.

The written conclusions and recommendations of the conference will feed into an **EESC resolution with policy recommendations to the new European Parliament and European Commission**, to be adopted in July.

The conference is open to the public. You can either join the conference in person or from remote. Prior registration for both is required. Please register until 11 April 2024 on our dedicated registration page: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/members-groups/groups/civil-society-organisations-group/events>





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