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**REX Work Programme**

*(Activities for 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2024)*

# **MAIN OBJECTIVES AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES**

The general objective of the EESC's Section for External Relations (REX) is to express the views of organised civil society on issues related to the **EU's external action** and the trade policy of the EU.

The REX section aims to promote a favourable framework for the activities of civil society organisations, to establish and improve direct contacts with civil society organisations in third countries and to support and strengthen civil and social dialogue in non-EU countries and regions promoting democracy, human rights and the fundamental principles of the rule of law.

This work is increasingly framed by the many international political and economic agreements the EU concludes with third countries.

The work of the section has changed significantly in recent years. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of supply chains and for civil society to accompany this process. The unjustified and unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine also created the need to provide assistance to Ukrainian civil society and to strengthen the links with civil society in the EU neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the resurgence of the conflict in the Middle East poses a number of challenges for civil society and calls for a peaceful solution based on international agreements and compliance with international humanitarian law.

In times of increasing geopolitical divide and continuous challenging of the core principles of multilateralism and the rules-based order, the REX section aims to strengthen civil society outreach in partner countries in order to promote high environmental, social and human rights standards and to reach a common understanding on the challenges the world is facing today – climate change, rising violence in many regions and the intensification of autocratic and authoritarian governance structures, growing conflict- and climate-related migration, increasing scarcity of natural resources such as water and critical raw materials, and risks related to digitalisation and health crises. The section pays specific attention to the Global South, which is facing a number of disinformation campaigns and a continuously shrinking space for civil society work and pluralism.

The REX section is attentive to the **priorities established by the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council** in order to ensure consistent and supportive action by organised civil society. The REX section also aims to draw the attention of the other institutions to issues identified by civil society as priorities for external policies. The REX section wants to contribute meaningfully to the preparation and adoption of the EU Strategic Agenda for the period 2024-2029.

This work programme focuses on 2024, and aims to illustrate the type and number of activities that REX organises. In geographical and thematic terms, the REX section will prioritise issues related to: 1) **EU enlargement and neighbourhood**; 2) **relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood, with a particular focus on priority areas**; 3) **international trade**; and 4**) soft diplomacy and horizontal activities, such as migration, blue diplomacy and climate diplomacy.**

**Through its activities, the section** 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.

All these activities will be carried out in line with priorities related to both the geopolitical situation and the impact that the EESC can have. Many of the activities are related to the existing 32 bodies of the REX section and are designed and implemented by these bodies with the political support of the REX bureau.

**All of the existing activities that REX carries out, coupled with the high number of existing and still growing REX structures, puts huge pressure on the available human and financial resources. The REX section therefore needs to focus on priority activities. The establishment of new activities, not foreseen in the current work programme, will require analysis of constraints related to the section's financial and human resources and consideration of the possibility of disengaging from other activities considered to be low-priority.**

# **2. EXPECTED NEW WORK IN PRIORITY AREAS**

This section summarises expected new work in priority areas, mentioning some of the key activities. Depending on their nature, some of these activities will be conducted by the relevant REX bodies; others will take place at section level due to their cross-cutting nature, importance, link to legislative work or the absence of a dedicated REX body. The list is not exhaustive and could be modified in order to reflect new international developments and changes in priorities.

**2.1. EU neighbourhood**

**2.1.1 Enlargement, candidate countries and potential candidate countries**

In November, the European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package, providing a detailed assessment of the state of play and the progress made by **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-2), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, and for the first time also Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia** on their respective paths towards accession to the European Union. In particular, the report focuses on progress in the implementation of fundamental reforms, as well as on providing clear guidance on the reform priorities ahead.

All of these countries are at different stages in their path towards the European Union, but this process of accession should be closely followed by civil society.

Should the Council agree to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, the current mandate of the existing civil society platforms (CSPs) will need to be enhanced in order to reflect the accession negotiations. It is worth mentioning, however, that the Association Agreements (which are the legal basis of the CSPs) will remain valid. Therefore, the EESC will continue to monitor the implementation of the Association Agreements with Moldova and Ukraine regardless of the Council's decision. The same applies for Georgia, which was promised candidate status depending on the country's progress in meeting necessary conditions.

Within the 2023 Enlargement Package, the European Commission also adopted a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, with the aim of bringing some of the benefits of membership to the region in advance of accession, boost economic growth and accelerate much needed socio-economic convergence. The idea behind it is to enable the partner countries to step up reforms and investments to significantly accelerate the speed of the enlargement process and the growth of their economies. For this, a new EUR 6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans has been proposed for the period 2024-2027. The Western Balkans Growth Plan requires the individual countries to draw up a "reform agenda". Civil society should play a central role in this process.

The Commission's 2023 annual report **on Türkiye** confirmed that in most policy areas there was only modest progress, if not backsliding, which means that the accession negotiations with Türkiye remain at a standstill. The report on the state of play of EU-Türkiye relations, published on 29 November 2023, may create momentum for a new positive dynamic between the EU and Türkiye, if the European Council gives its green light to implement the recommendations on advancing the relationship "in a strategic and forward-looking manner".

The EESC will continue engaging with the candidate countries and potential candidate countries in the framework of its existing bodies that follow the developments in the region: the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee and the Eastern Partnership Follow-up Committee, as well as its bilateral bodies created to follow accession negotiations and Association Agreements: the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, and the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform. It is expected that the EU-North Macedonia and the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committees will also start their work in 2024, provided that the first negotiation chapters are launched with these countries.

In 2024, the EESC will be implementing the "enlargement candidate members" pilot project, which is aimed at involving civil society representatives from candidate countries in the drafting of EESC opinions. The REX section will be actively involved in the implementation and coordination process with other parts of the EESC.

The REX section will also take an active part in the reflection on how to better prepare and even reform the EU for future enlargements. The REX section will participate in the drafting of opinions related to enlargement under the remit of other EESC sections – e.g. on issues such as the common agricultural policy, cohesion policy, and the internal market.

Together with the **Ad-hoc group on fundamental rights** **and the rule of law**, the REX section will coordinate visits to Moldova and Serbia in 2024.

**2.1.2 Other priority countries and regions**

* **The UK**

The EESC deals with EU-UK relations mainly via its EU-UK Follow-up Committee, which fosters relations with UK civil society and monitors key developments on both sides of the Channel that are important for EU-UK relations. In 2024, the EU-UK Follow-up Committee will adopt an own-initiative opinion on EU-UK youth engagement, which will be drawn up based on institutional activities towards enhanced engagement between young people in the UK and the EU, as well as on extensive feedback from youth representatives from across the UK. In addition, in 2024, the EU-UK Follow-up Committee will hold four meetings, at which its members will address other topical issues arising from EU-UK relations, paying particular attention to the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. In 2024, the chair of the EU-UK Follow-up Committee is expected to represent the EESC in the plenary session of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly that takes place twice a year.

Another EESC-supported body dealing with EU-UK relations is the EU Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which advises the Commission on the implementation of the full TCA.

* **The EEA and the Arctic region**

The Agreement on the European Economic Area brings together in an internal market the 27 EU Member States and the three EEA EFTA states – Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Following its establishment in 1994, the EEA will celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2024. At the EEA Consultative Committee meeting in Stockholm in March 2023 it was decided to write a comprehensive resolution and report, chronicling the experience of the EEA from the perspective of civil society, but also giving recommendations for the future EEA. The EU and EEA EFTA rapporteurs will jointly prepare a document with the working title *EEA cooperation for thirty years: past, present and future* that will be presented and discussed at the 33rd EEA CC meeting in Iceland, in May 2024. An EEA CC meeting in Budapest during Hungary's EU presidency has also been tentatively discussed.

As follow-up to the information report on *The Arctic – how to ensure a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous future for a geostrategic region* (REX/568), a small delegation of members will participate in the Arctic Frontiers 2024 conference in Tromso, Norway, in January/February. The rapporteur and co-rapporteur will also carry out other follow-up activities throughout the year to publicise the EESC's information report. It is also planned to organise an event in Brussels with Arctic stakeholders to learn about their views and strengthen the dialogue between their organisations, the EESC and other EU policy-makers, as preparation for developing a possible own-initiative opinion in 2024. The objective of this opinion would be to influence EU-Arctic policy for the next cycle, 2024-2029, from an EESC perspective. Possibly also a request for an exploratory opinion from the Danish EU presidency in the second half of 2025 could be envisaged.

* **Armenia**

The section will continue to engage with Armenian civil society via the recently established EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform. The objective will be to enhance debate on technical subjects falling under the scope of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

* **Belarus**

The authoritarian regime in Belarus and the fact that the country suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative has made cooperation with civil society in the region almost impossible. Possible cooperation with the independent Belarusian civil society and the civil society in exile is under discussion at the Eastern Neighbourhood Follow-up Committee.

* **EUROMED**

The EU's Southern Neighbourhood is particularly affected by multiple crises, such as the climate and migration crises. In addition, 2024 will most likely still be marked by the conflict between Israel and Hamas, with heavy civilian casualties on both sides. As a representative of organised civil society, the EESC will continue expressing its strong solidarity with its counterparts in the region, with full support for their commitment to peaceful, sustainable and democratic development, based on shared values such as human rights. Young people are the hope for a prosperous future for the region, and they will play a key role in the EESC's activities related to the EU's Southern Neighbourhood in 2024. These activities will include an own-initiative opinion dedicated to *Youth involvement in social and civil dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean*. This issue will also constitute the main topic of the 2024 Euromed Summit.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

in connection with candidate countries and potential candidate countries:

* Inaugural meeting of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC)
* Inaugural meeting of the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee (JCC)
* 18th meeting of the EU-Montenegro JCC, in Montenegro
* 19th meeting of the EU-Montenegro JCC, in the EU
* 17th meeting of the EU-Serbia JCC, in the EU
* 18th meeting of the EU-Serbia JCC, in Serbia + Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law country visit
* Western Balkans High-Level Civil Society Conference, in the Western Balkans region or in one of the EU Member States
* 58th Western Balkans Follow-up Committee meeting (external), in Bosnia and Herzegovina
* 59th Western Balkans Follow-up Committee meeting (internal), in Brussels
* 60th Western Balkans Follow-up Committee meeting (internal), in Brussels
* Opinion (Commission referral) on the new Growth Plan and Facility for the Western Balkans
* Hungarian presidency exploratory opinion on the Western Balkans (possible)
* 15th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Ukraine or in Brussels
* 16th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Brussels
* 13th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform in Chișinău, conference on *Civil society can fight disinformation* and rule of law visit in Moldova
* 14th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, in Brussels
* 13th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Tbilisi
* 14th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Brussels
* Meeting of Eastern Neighbours Follow-up Committee
* Two meetings of the EU-Ukraine Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum
* Two meetings of the EU-Georgia Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum
* Two meetings of the EU-Moldova Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum
* 42nd meeting of the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee, in Türkiye + preparatory meeting

UK

* Four meetings of the EESC's UK Follow-up Committee
* Drafting of an own-initiative opinion on EU-UK youth engagement, and mission to the UK
* Regular contacts with civil society organisations in the devolved nations

Euromed

* Euromed Summit with youth representatives from the Euromed region
* Own-initiative opinion on *Youth involvement in social and civil dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region*
* Two Euromed Follow-Up Committee meetings
* Exploratory mission to Algeria
* EU-Morocco JAG meeting
* Participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean
* Co-organisation of, and participation in, the Brussels Civil Society Forum (MAJALAT)

EEA

* 33rd meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee, in Iceland
* 34th meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee, in Hungary – tbc
* Participation in the Arctic Frontiers 2024 conference in Tromso, Norway and other follow-up to REX/568
* Arctic-related own-initiative opinion and an event with Arctic stakeholders – tbc

Armenia

* 4th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Yerevan
* 5th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Brussels

Belarus

* Meeting of the Eastern Neighbours Follow-up Committee devoted to Belarus

**2.2. Relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood**

2.2.1 ACP and Africa

Given the uncertainties regarding the future of the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee as regards both its role and its financing, it is uncertain whether the activities regularly organised by the Follow-up Committee (regional seminar, meeting of the EU-Africa Economic and Social Stakeholders Network, meeting of ACP-EU economic and social stakeholders, etc.) will be able to take place. They might need to be rethought. This document takes this into account. The work of the Follow-up Committee will focus:

* on the one hand, on the objectives of the Samoa Agreement, and above all on the implementation of the participation/inclusion of civil society in the follow-up to the Agreement,
* on the other hand, on priority themes for ACP countries and the EU, as well as around priority themes for the EESC.

**The Samoa Agreement** with its new dialogue architecture will remain at the centre of our work. The aim is to ensure the effective participation of civil society, including the social partners, in the implementation of this agreement. The EESC and our Follow-up Committee will continue to press for the EESC's role to continue to be recognised under the new agreement. Work will continue on adapting our Follow-up Committee to the new challenges and architecture of the agreement.

The development of cooperation with the African Union ECOSOC in the framework of the EU-African Union ECOSOC will also remain a priority. As some of the countries of the African Union are also members of Union for the Mediterranean, relevant cooperation between the EU-ACP Follow-up Committee and the Euromed Follow-up Committee will be established.

**Climate change** will be another priority theme. Climate change is becoming increasingly felt in Europe – it is hitting African, Caribbean and Pacific countries even harder. The aim is to implement the necessary measures to combat climate change at the same time as measures to increase resilience against the effects of climate change.

The theme of climate change will necessarily include **the issue of water** in all its dimensions, the energy transition, with the issue of **access to critical raw materials**, as well as the problem of **climate migrants**.

One of the major concerns in many ACP countries remains **training, in particular of young people and women**. Moreover, there is, everywhere – in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific – an urgent need to promote **civic education** in order to **combat disinformation**, which is unfortunately present in the media and social networks and risks undermining our democratic values.

The Follow-up Committee will continue to promote the involvement of civil society in the implementation and monitoring of the Economic Partnership Agreements. The ongoing study on civil society participation in the EU-SADC EPA will continue until spring 2024. It will provide an opportunity to identify good practices in other agreements, including the CARIFORUM-EU EPA, which could be replicated not only in the EU-SADC EPA but also in other EPAs.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Opinion on the upcoming Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative on a strengthened partnership with Africa;
* Own-initiative opinion on a topic related to democracy in Africa;
* Pursue the cooperation with the European Commission and the OACPS on the implementation of Article 95 of the Samoa Agreement, in particular in the context of the study carried out by the OECD;
* Participation in meetings of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) and strengthening cooperation with the JPA, in particular as regards civil society events in the margins of the JPA;
* Strengthening cooperation with economic, social and cultural committees in Africa, including the ECOSOCC of the African Union and the UCESA (Union of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions of Africa), including signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union ECOSOCC and organisation of a joint event;
* Follow-up of the study on the participation of civil society in the EU-SADC EPA: organisation of an event in the SADC region to disseminate the results and discuss the recommendations arising from it (tbc);
* Continuing work to ensure that civil society is involved in the implementation of EPAs, in particular the EU-Ivory Coast EPA but also the EU-Kenya EPA. An exploratory mission to Kenya could be organised after the signature of the EPA, which includes the setting-up of Domestic Advisory Groups;
* Continuation of the work of the Indo-Pacific Task Force, including in the context of the development of an EU-Pacific civil society body based on the architecture of the Samoa Agreement.

**2.2.2 Latin America (LA)**

The objective for 2024 is to maintain our presence on **various EU-LA bilateral and regional fora.** Over the past two years REX contacts and activities with LA partners have been very dynamic and visibly intensifying (examples from 2023 include EU-CELAC, EU-Central America DAGs, EU-Andean DAGs, EuroLat, EU-Chile JCC, Bogota labour conference ).

In the bilateral dimension, the results of the elections held on 19 November 2023 in **Argentina** brought uncertainty about the future of Argentinian democracy, concerns about the role of civil society and questions about available formats for our bilateral relations. Consequently, the future of the long-awaited FTA with Mercosur remains uncertain.

At the same time, due to the modernisation of the association framework with **Chile** and following the changes on the political scene in **Brazil** since early 2023, the relations with these two countries are currently gaining more prominence on the bilateral level. REX will be watching closely the presidential election in **Mexico** in 2024 and the follow-up on the update of the bilateral Global Agreement.

The result of the constitutional referendum in **Chile** on 17 December 2023 is not likely to impact the ratification of the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement (AFA), which is expected to be signed before the end of 2023.

**Brazil** has been raising its international profile as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2022-23, chair of G20 until late 2024 and of Mercosur (until early December 2023). The REX section aims to intensify bilateral relations with the country's recently re-established Sustainable Economic and Social Development Council (CDESS).

The **main areas of interest** to be further explored in the relations with LA partners include investment (the EU is the main partner in the region), trade (including in raw materials and rare earths needed to boost the green energy transition), sustainable development, environmental protection and combating climate change (the region accounts for 50% of the world's biodiversity), the digital alliance, fighting inequalities and empowering women, youth and vulnerable populations. Last, but not least, LA and the EU share many common values and interests, so our exchanges should reaffirm our commitment to a multilateral rules-based order, democracy, human rights and fair and free trade.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Two meetings of the EU-Latin America Follow-up Committee;
* Own-initiative opinion on *Deforestation of the Amazonian Forest – impacts on the climate change and global environment; consequences for companies, workers and population*;
* Participation of a REX delegation in the meeting of the EuroLat Joint Parliamentary Assembly;
* Two joint meetings of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee;
* High-level mission to Brazil by an EESC delegation headed by the EESC president
* Meeting of the EU-Brazil Round Table – tbc (if re-established)

**2.2.3 Russia and Central Asia**

While relations have been broken off with the representation of civil society that is close to the State in Russia after the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is important to continue contacts with Russian civil society in exile, which opposes the war and the regime and has continuous contacts with the remaining free civil society organisations in the country. Meetings with them will continue according to the current arrangements, which sees a regular presence of free Russian civil society in the EESC to present their problems and requests to the EU institutions, but also to participate in our meetings and to provide valuable contacts and speakers for different EESC initiatives (conferences against disinformation, participation in section meetings and events, etc.).

With the extension of the remit of the EU-Russia Follow-up Committee to Central Asia, it is planned to intensify existing relations with Central Asian countries, starting with an OIO proposal on the situation of civil society in Kazakhstan.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Two meetings of the EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-up Committee;
* Own-initiative opinion on the state of civil society in Kazakhstan, with a fact-finding mission;

**2.2.5 Transatlantic relations**

The Transatlantic Follow-up Committee will continue monitoring relations with the US and Canada and developing relations with civil society. During 2024, the Follow-up Committee will concentrate on dual education and transatlantic alliances on fighting disinformation.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Mission to the US and Canada (tbc) with the main topics cooperation on dual education and combating disinformation
* Two meetings of the Transatlantic Follow-up Committee, in Brussels

**2.2.6. Japan and South-East Asia** Due to various geopolitical tensions, the EU is looking to develop closer relations with the ASEAN countries. Therefore, the remit of the EU-Japan Follow-up Committee was extended to Southeast Asia.

Following the extension of its remit, the EU-Japan and South East Asia Follow-up Committee will not only dedicate its work to Japan but also identify EU key interests in the South East Asia region. This will include keeping an eye on the state of play in the ongoing trade negotiations with ASEAN countries and seeking to get an overview of civil society in the countries in the region, in particular countries with which the EU is negotiating free trade agreements that foresee the establishment of domestic advisory groups. The main focus of the Follow-up Committee will however still be on Japan, building further on information received and contacts created during its mission to Japan in October 2023.

The Follow-up Committee will also start reflecting on drafting an information report and/or organising a Japan- or regional-focused event in 2024.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Two meetings of the EU-Japan and South East Asia Follow-up Committee;
* Preparation of an information report on *The situation of civil society organisations in the ASEAN countries*

**2.2.7 China**

The EU-China Round Table last met, in hybrid form, in December 2021. After this long break, there is now a firm intention to organise an EU-China Round Table meeting in 2024. In fact, the EESC president suggested to the Chinese side holding a meeting in Brussels in January-February 2024 and another meeting in China in November-December 2024 – the response of the China Economic and Social Council is still awaited. In order for the EU members to prepare well for the actual Round Table meeting, it is planned to organise a hearing-type preparatory meeting in the first half of 2024 to which various China-experts will be invited as speakers.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Hearing-type preparatory meeting before the EU-China Round Table
* Meeting(s) of the EU-China Round Table – tbc

**2.3. International trade**

In 2023, trends that emerged or accelerated in 2022 developed further.

The EU continued its work on the ongoing FTA negotiations, with some successes (New Zealand, Chile), unforeseen setbacks (Australia) and persisting gridlock (Mercosur).

The focus continued to shift towards strategic autonomy and resilience, particularly in the context of global supply chains and strategic sectors for the green and digital transitions. This was also reflected in the new European Economic Security Strategy, with a risk-based, cross-sectoral approach and a strong trade component.

At the same time, several EU autonomous measures with important implications for trade were either deployed (CBAM, deforestation) or saw significant advancements (forced labour, due diligence).

The implementation of the Commission Communication on Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) yielded the first results with the advanced TSD provisions in the new EU-New Zealand FTA.

At multilateral level, the WTO tried to build on the momentum gained from MC12 with a view to achieving further successes at the upcoming MC13.

In this context, 2024 will be a crucial year for EU trade policy and beyond, not least due to the elections and the new term. The REX section will convey and coordinate the views of civil society in all of the above-mentioned areas, with a focus on consistency and a cross-sectoral approach. The section will keep pursuing improved communication on international trade and its implications, and will call for further involvement of civil society with regard to EU policy-making and ongoing negotiations, as well as at WTO level.

Monitoring of the negotiation, implementation and enforcement of trade agreements by civil society will remain a key focus area. The section will continue to monitor EU bilateral and regional trade negotiations, and their ratification processes. The REX secretariat will continue to provide administrative and policy support to the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) addressing horizontal challenges and cross-cutting topics through an improved All DAGs coordination.

The successful experience of the TSD Civil Society Forum will be further built on and improved based on lessons learned from the first two editions.

The section will also follow the WTO's work and reform process, in particular by participating as a civil society advisor in the upcoming WTO Ministerial Conference 13 in Abu Dhabi (February 2024), and by actively contributing through working sessions and bilateral meetings at the annual WTO Public Forum (September 2024).

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Third Civil Society Forum on Trade and Sustainable Development;
* Four meetings of the EESC International Trade Follow-up Committee;
* Participation in the WTO Ministerial Conference ("MC13") in Abu Dhabi;
* Follow-up to WTO MC13 and annual mission to Geneva;
* Participation in the WTO Public Forum (September 2024);
* Two to four meetings per EU DAG, with related DAG-to-DAG meetings and joint workshops (in total +/- 50 meetings for the 12 DAGs currently active: Cariforum-EU Consultative Committee, EU DAG for Korea FTA, EU DAG for EU-Central America FTA, EU DAG for the EU FTA with Columbia, Peru and Ecuador, EU DAG for EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic Agreement, EU DAG for FTA with Japan, EU DAG for FTA with Vietnam; EU DAG for FTA with Singapore, EU DAG for the Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine; EU DAG for the DCFTA with Moldova, EU DAG for the DCFTA with Georgia, EU DAG for the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the UK);
* One All DAGs meeting and ad hoc meetings of All DAG presidencies;
* Cooperation with WTO secretariat on exploring ways to make civil society involvement at WTO level more effective;
* Cooperation with UNCTAD and ILO to build on the contacts from 2022/2023.

**2.4. Soft diplomacy and horizontal activities**

The main benefit of the relations between EU and third countries' civil society is the promotion of EU values through **soft diplomacy**. The REX section is already doing this in its different meetings with civil society representatives from third countries.

In recent years, the European Commission and the EEAS decided to put a specific emphasis on different kinds of soft diplomacy, such as **economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, climate diplomacy, health diplomacy**, **digital diplomacy**, etc. The EESC is a natural partner of the other institutions in the field of soft diplomacy, due to its experience and its network of civil society contacts. There is therefore a need to strengthen and improve the work done by REX in these fields as well as its cooperation with relevant international organisations and UN bodies.

Following its opinions on the **Global Gateway**, the REX section also aims to actively participate in the Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform, organised by the European Commission.

Following its opinion on ***Strengthening multilateralism*** *and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of the civil society contribution to the UN system*, the REX section is seeking, together with other EESC sections, to give civil society a strong voice in the "Summit of the Future" process by deepening its recent cooperation with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is important that the EESC is represented at the **Summit of the Future in September 2024.**

**Disinformation:**

In 2023, the EESC launched a project aimed at involving civil society in the fight against **Russian disinformation and foreign interference**. The project consists of a series of three conferences, accompanied by targeted awareness-raising campaigns on social media, to be held in EU Member States and candidate countries. The first conference took place in Sofia (Bulgaria) last June, the next one will be held in Chișinău (Moldova) in April 2024, followed by the third one probably towards the end of the year in Athens (Greece). The events, organised with local partners such as the national ECOSOCs, are open to European debunking organisations and Russian independent civil society in exile. The Ad hoc group on fundamental rights is also involved in these activities.

**Blue diplomacy:**

Following the **EESC call for a Blue Deal**, it is important to follow up on the EESC opinion on **Blue diplomacy** and to explore avenues for the practical application of blue diplomacy and water-related solutions as instruments of peace and prosperity in the global regions most exposed to water stress. Cooperation with relevant civil society organisations will also be developed in this respect.

**Migration:**

Migration will remain at the top of the EU agenda. Migratory pressure on the EU is likely to intensify as a consequence of the Israel-Hamas conflict, as well as other ongoing conflicts. The phenomenon of climate-related migration is also intensifying and there is no legal framework for such migration in the EU. The EU has a visa-free regime with 60 third countries but circumvention of visa-free rules is creating additional migratory pressure for the EU, and thus the regime should be clearly defined in order to generate social and economic benefits and to avoid irregular migration. The REX section will closely follow these issues and draw up a proposal for improving the EU legislation in these fields.

On all cross-cutting priorities and issues related to soft diplomacy, the REX section will work in close cooperation with the other EESC sections involved in these matters.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2024:**

* Two conferences entitled *Civil society can defeat disinformation* (in Moldova and Athens)
* Participation in the UN Summit of the Future (tbc)
* Drafting of opinion on *Water politics: Empowering youth, women, and indigenous and local communities*
* Water Conference in Sofia, organised by REX and CCMI (tbc)
* Participation in World Water Week in Stockholm (August 2024) (tbc)
* Participation in the meetings of the Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform
* Drafting of an opinion on the *Revision of the EU visa suspension mechanism*

1. This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)