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# Civil Society Organisations' Bulletin



**STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY,  
FIGHT DISINFORMATION AND  
FAKE NEWS**

# FOREWORD

## Democracy in decline?

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Séamus Boland © EESC

In this edition of the Civil Society Organisations' bulletin, you will read a great deal about the many challenges to democracy. In particular, the threats posed by large-scale disinformation, including misleading or outright false information, often associated with extensively unregulated and non-verifiable social media. The mounting levels of evidence already gathered demonstrate that the damage done by 'fake news' to truth and democracy is now beyond question. However, the [coming elections to the European Parliament](#)<sup>1</sup> remain almost unprotected against the many actors from within and outside the EU who spread disinformation on purpose, unscrupulously pursuing agendas that are strictly designed to benefit them at the expense of democratic opinion-making and the common good. The case for a sea change in bringing about appropriate regulation is also beyond question, especially when the large companies involved continue to resist any attempt to bring order into this toxic jungle.

True democracy is also threatened by the fact that, according to recent polls, citizens are drifting away from mainstream parties from the political centre and supporting those on the political extremes, partially pursuing agendas that go against European values such as freedom, equality and the rule of law. In Europe we have a long history of such behaviours, which saw the birth of fascism and other extreme ideologies. Ideologies which created uncontrollable evil, which should never be forgotten.

One of the ways to guard against that is the creation of a political system that is totally inclusive. In the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group, we are clear that such a system should start with designing a process involving civil society organisations in national and European policy-making in a structured way so that their voices can at least be heard. This was also reiterated in the [EESC Civil Society Week](#)<sup>2</sup> and

at our recent conference on [Strengthening Civil Society and Participatory Democracy in the EU: the way forward](#)<sup>3</sup>. Speaking at the event, participants were glad to hear the sentiments expressed by Pedro Silva Pereira, Vice-President of the European Parliament, in support of such dialogue. Better involvement of organised civil society and increased citizen participation were also proposed in the final report of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>4</sup> held in 2022. At EU level, civil dialogue along with citizens' panels, in a properly designed structure, can play a major role in narrowing the widening gap between the EU institutions and citizens. We outlined the strong reasons to make progress on this process in the [open letter](#)<sup>5</sup> jointly written by us and Civil Society Europe, signed by 156 signatories from civil society, addressed to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

During a [thematic debate](#)<sup>6</sup> on the **Nature Restoration Law** at a meeting of our Group in March we heard about the at least partial failure of EU democracy when it comes to the necessary impact assessment of this law in terms of our planet and the different stakeholders involved. The fact that citizens do not feel sufficiently connected to the urgent and precarious state of our planet means that we are likely yet again to fail future generations by failing to act in time.

Our Group and the signatories of the open letter recognise that designing a structure for an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations in all policy areas is difficult and requires lots of thought. However, the prize of a more resilient and inclusive democracy would not only make the effort worthwhile, but also correspond to the provisions of the [Treaty on EU](#)<sup>7</sup>, especially Article 11. The only fear preventing this from happening is fear itself.

Earlier on in April, we partnered with the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) for the [launch event](#)<sup>8</sup> of the Poverty Watch Report 2023, which I highly recommend reading.

We also held a very successful conference with the title [Building Together the EU We Want](#)<sup>9</sup> to explore European citizens' expectations concerning

the socio-economic and political challenges faced by the EU. The event brought together speakers and participants from a significant number of European civil society networks and national civil society organisations. 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. Further details will be available in the May edition of our bulletin.

I would also like to draw your attention to the [8<sup>th</sup> edition](#) of the [European Day of Liberal Professions](#)<sup>10</sup>. This year's event will be held on 7 May and address the theme **Professional Support for the EU Blue Deal**. The EESC unveiled its plan for a comprehensive EU water strategy on 26 October 2024. Its [declaration on an EU Blue Deal](#)<sup>11</sup> provided a set of 15 guiding principles and 21 concrete actions to address the very existential water crisis that we are facing in the EU due to the challenges of water scarcity, pollution and climate change. The proposals include water consumption labels, a Blue Transition Fund, water conditionality in EU funds and a dedicated EU Commissioner for water. During the conference of the EESC's Liberal Professions' Category, participants will discuss ways in which liberal professions can help find innovative solutions to put an EU Blue Deal in place and to mitigate the water-related challenges that Europe and the world will face in the years and decades to come. Mark the date of this important event in your calendar!

Séamus Boland

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

2 EESC, press release, <https://europa.eu/!tMGndD>

3 EESC, conference, 25 March, <https://europa.eu/!pjkVBb>

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

5 EESC, open letter, <https://europa.eu/!yG8b6t>

6 EESC, thematic debate, 20 March, <https://europa.eu/!Qw6QBF>

7 EUR-Lex, Consolidated version of the Treaty on EU, <https://europa.eu/!G4N6nV>

8 EESC, launch event, 8 April, <https://europa.eu/!dJpkBf>

9 EESC, conference, 16 April, <https://europa.eu/!kFNcJ7>

10 EESC, 8th edition of the Day of the Liberal Professions 2024, <https://europa.eu/!Fj6cjk>

11 EESC, declaration on EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!qgk7Yn>

# STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY, FIGHT DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

## Untying the Web of Disinformation: it Takes Resilience to do it



Baiba Miltoviča © EESC

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In a year marked by the [European elections](#)<sup>1</sup>, the EU institutions consider it particularly important to build more resilient democracies. Recent international developments and the advancement of digital technologies have made this challenge more difficult.

Since the European elections in 2019, the European Commission and the European Parliament have been involved in **strengthening and revitalising European democracy**. The European

Economic and Social Committee (EESC) decided to contribute by delivering a strategic own-initiative opinion on [Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation](#)<sup>2</sup>, coordinated by its [TEN Section](#)<sup>3</sup>.

This opinion follows opinion TEN/687 on the [Action Plan against Disinformation](#)<sup>4</sup> adopted in March 2019. It looks at the multifaceted aspects of disinformation, notably those concerning younger generations, who are the primary targets of misinformation and manipulation. In drafting this opinion, the TEN section has been developing synergies with the INT<sup>5</sup>, SOC<sup>6</sup> and REX<sup>7</sup> sections, the Liaison Group<sup>8</sup> and the Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)<sup>9</sup>, in particular regarding the defence of democracy.

The working schedule is progressing well. The rapporteurs met with FRRL on 5 February. An expert hearing and the first study group

meeting took place on 8 February, followed by the second one on 5 March. The TEN section hosted a preliminary debate on 28 February attended by the two rapporteurs, **Carlos Manuel Trindade** and **John Comer**, the representatives of the EESC ad hoc group on elections, **Cinzia Del Rio**, **Christa Schweng** and **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, as well as **Olga Chyzhova**, President of Ukrainian Prism Europe.

A fact-finding mission to Finland and Poland on 29 February and 1 March provided additional insights into the factors enabling disinformation and misinformation to prevail over factual information, including political neglect, rising inequalities and lack of education, notably in the digital domain.

This opinion will provide an analysis and put forward concrete recommendations. It will be voted on at the TEN section meeting and adopted by the EESC plenary in April.

- 1 European Parliament, European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
- 2 EESC opinion TEN/830, Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation, <https://europa.eu/!Bv7R3Y>
- 3 EESC, Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>
- 4 EESC opinion TEN/687, Action Plan against Disinformation, <https://europa.eu/!Xr77Gh>
- 5 EESC, Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, <https://europa.eu/!pK46ky>
- 6 EESC, Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, <https://europa.eu/!xW46cK>
- 7 EESC, Section for External Relations, <https://europa.eu/!jX84ND>
- 8 EESC, Liaison Group, <https://europa.eu/!bcxqtY>
- 9 EESC, Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law, <https://europa.eu/!gD79MT>

## Empowering Minds: Harnessing Media Literacy and Independent Public Media Against Disinformation



John Comer © EESC

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TEN/830 Safeguarding  
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Disinformation can be defined as false, inaccurate or misleading information deliberately created and spread to deceive the public. Misinformation can be defined as false or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent. Online disinformation poses a substantial threat to democracies.

The fight against disinformation is therefore one of the most important fronts in the wider battle currently being waged between the defenders of freedom and democracy and autocratic political forces. If democracy is to win this fundamental battle, decisive action is needed and very significant resources are required.

The technological means exist to fight disinformation, and a strategy is needed so that the various **dangers users face online**, including disinformation, hybrid threats and cyber security, are dealt with. **This strategy must respect core democratic values of the EU such as freedom of expression.**

A comprehensive effort is needed to deliver media literacy at all educational levels, but also targeted at **all age groups and minorities**. In Finland, tools to promote critical thinking form an integral part of the education system from kindergarten to college graduates. This prepares young people to fight all sources of disinformation.

A necessary first step is to guarantee pluralism in EU journalism and to classify journalism as a European public good as suggested by UNESCO<sup>1</sup>.

The European Commission should consider the possibility of an independent EU news channel free of Government and Commission interference and available on all different

platforms which should allow all European citizens to obtain the information they need to make informed choices.

The collection of personal data by social media and digital platforms, without the informed consent of their users, must be addressed in a future revision of data protection legislation.

To fight disinformation, **an adequate public service media is essential**. It must be publicly financed and must be independent of the government of the day.

In opinion [TEN/830](#)<sup>2</sup> the EESC outlines a strategy to safeguard democracy against disinformation not only in advance of the EU elections but most importantly, to put forward a strategy to manage disinformation into the future. Disinformation can never be fully eliminated but a long-term strategy is needed to safeguard the future of democracy. Greater challenges will emerge with the further development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the advance, spread and further development of social and digital platforms.

1 UNESCO, Windhoek+30 Declaration: Information as a Public Good, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/windhoek30-declaration-information-public-good>  
2 EESC opinion TEN/830, Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation, <https://europa.eu/!Bv7R3Y>

# A whole-of-society approach to tackling disinformation and respecting fundamental rights



Paula Gori © European University Institute

**Paula GORI**  
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European Digital  
Media Observatory  
(EDMO)

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. What is new, due to technological and digital developments, and the **new media landscape where information is accessed online**, is the speed, the reach, the tools and the techniques used to disseminate it. It is also quite a complex phenomenon, in the sense that it involves many actors (both for its production/diffusion and for the response to it), it can have different purposes and impacts and it evolves in parallel with technological developments. Overall, a proper understanding of how disinformation works is key to building a policy response, the guiding principle of which must be respecting fundamental rights. **This is why the response is a whole of society one**, where risk mitigation measures and societal resilience are among the main aims.

The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO<sup>1</sup>) fosters the multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approach and contributes to detecting narratives, identifying risks and building resilience. Its work is mainly based around four pillars, namely: 1) media and information literacy; 2) fact-checking; 3) research; 4) policy analysis. The collaboration with 14 national or multi-national hubs covering all EU Member

States is a top asset in this setting.

A few examples of how this translates in practice:

The EDMO is developing quality standards, guidelines and best practices for media and information literacy (MIL) activities. For MIL initiatives to effectively contribute to building societal resilience, quality and impact assessments are key.

The EDMO has a community of European independent fact-checking organisations (52 as of today). Thanks to their contribution, the EDMO publishes monthly briefs, recapping the main disinformation narratives detected in the EU.

Research on disinformation is fundamental for informed and evidence-based policy decisions. Not by chance, both the Code of Practice on Disinformation and the Digital Services Act (DSA) state that online platforms have to grant access to both public and private data to researchers (including from civil society organisations). The EDMO has carried out pioneering work in drafting a code of conduct, which grants access to the latter in compliance with data protection rules.

The EDMO is also a member of the permanent taskforce on the Code of Practice on Disinformation and, among others, it is leading yet another pioneering conversation around structural indicators, which are key to assessing the impact of the Code itself.



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To conclude, it is worth mentioning the EDMO taskforce on the 2024 European Parliament elections. Its work includes a daily newsletter which, from April until the elections, will disclose fact-checked articles on the EU elections published in the EU Member States and a report on disinformation narratives during the 2023 national elections. In light of the elections, it is worth highlighting that **we may for example witness disinformation in the electoral process, as well as disinformation delegitimising the elections themselves**. This comes on top of disinformation narratives on specific topics addressed during the campaigns, as well as on the EU and its policies, in order to discredit it. In addition to fact-checkers, civil society organisations play a key role in both detecting narratives and actors (e.g., with open-source intelligence) and in advocating that the right to vote and to make informed decisions are respected.

More practical examples of the EDMOs work can be found on <https://edmo.eu/>.

<sup>1</sup> EDMO, <https://edmo.eu/>

## Civil society alliance for deliberative democracy



Christian Moos © EESC

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are attacking the liberal-democratic order, especially the far right at the moment. All this is well known and requires civil defence – a civil society alliance for deliberative democracy.

The breeding ground for authoritarian comen, some of whom pose as the avengers of the disenfranchised, like Trump, was created by the toxic effects of 30 years of globalisation. Not because globalisation per se was wrong or bad, but because the ways in which its benefits were shared out left too many people behind in Western democracies.

The digital revolution is also having a toxic effect, even though it was initially hailed as a way to 'liquefy' democracy, which was meant as a good thing. However, 'liquid democracy' has promoted baser instincts, and **democracy in its new state is detrimental to freedom. The ability to debate is falling by the**

**wayside**. We are forgetting how to tolerate other opinions and are afraid of doubt, which is successfully banished in the echo chambers of social media.

However, doubt is a valuable asset. It protects against absolute certainties and the hardening of dogmatic views, which are completely incompatible with continuously learning systems like liberal democracy.

And how can organised civil society, which rejects the extremes, position itself in this brave new world? Can it save itself through activism? Civil society also helps to erode democracy when it loses the ability to debate. Those who want to preserve or restore liberal democracy would do well to reinvest in debate culture and treat supposed miracle solutions with extreme scepticism.

Democracy is at risk. Everyone agrees on this. Trump is threatening it and Putin even more so. Even the EU has its 'dictators'. Demagogues

**Our imperilled democracy needs civil society forums where people do not only engage in rhetoric as a means of drowning out opposing voices, but also relearn how to listen,** weigh up arguments and reassess our own positions.

**The EESC is a place where this happens.** But even here, a good many heated arguments in recent times have shown that even this

venerable institution is not immune to the changing times.

Nevertheless, the Committee can lead the way and develop a voluntary code of conduct to strengthen deliberative democracy and reinforce the exclusive use, to the best of its members' knowledge and in good faith, of fact-based information and arguments.

This could lead to the development of a **voluntary quality label for a democratic debate culture**, reaching far beyond the EESC, that could bring people from very different social backgrounds and interest groups closer together. This is urgently needed. Because, if the centre collapses, the fringes will inevitably take over.

## Why are jokes about blondes a sign of cultural and linguistic sexism?



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Justyna Kalina Ochedzan  
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Do blondes laugh at jokes about blondes? We laugh at them at family events. We share them with each other and repeat them. It may seem like an innocent joke, but how we create prejudices and stereotypes is often unconscious.

Who is the blonde from our jokes? She is always beautiful and always... not so smart. Is this a statistical truth about women with blond hair? Definitely not. **Women are better educated than men.** In 2022, 48% of women and 37% of men aged 25-34 were in possession of higher education<sup>2</sup>. Just as a lie repeated several times becomes true, the seemingly innocent joke repeated ad nauseam in company transmits cultural and linguistic sexism.

Why is it worth talking about? Not because telling jokes about blondes in the company of blondes, or women in general, is rude and sexist but because **the channels of discrimination are woven into small things.** And if we do not have a problem when a particular group is publicly ridiculed and devalued, then when we

are anonymous on the internet, the barriers of cultural and linguistic sexism are pushed much further. According to Amnesty International (2023), **cyber violence disproportionately affects women and girls** and is often overlooked by authorities or website administrators. The internet is therefore an even more exaggerated vision of inequality, fuelled, on the one hand, by the temptation to be anonymous and, on the other, by algorithms that simply exacerbate negative trends if there are no ethical and equality filters. Therefore, in an increasingly virtualised and digitalised world, gender-based discrimination should be subject to **clear criminal penalties** and **women's legal claims concerning cyber violence** should also **cover inaction by law enforcement authorities.**

1 EESC Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UK>

2 Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230530-3>

## Democracy under attack: Urgent strategies to fight disinformation and fake news



**Edgar Diogo VILARES (PT)**  
Coordinator, Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies (UMP)

Edgar Diogo Vilares © EESC

Strengthening democracy and fighting disinformation and fake news is a pressing global challenge. Around the world, disinformation is multiplying and becoming an increasingly complex phenomenon, supported by emerging information manipulation techniques. This problem not only erodes human rights, but also undermines crucial elements for a genuine democracy.

In the context of mutualism, which promotes

social relations based on reciprocity and mutual cooperation, **disinformation is seen as a direct threat to the foundations of a fair society.** Spreading fake news can undermine trust among members of a community, eroding the social ties that are essential to the healthy operation of a mutual and democratic structure.

The question arises of whether social media platforms should be held accountable for the spread of fake news. **Establishing effective legal frameworks to regulate the content of these platforms** is an important consideration. The balance between freedom of expression and corporate responsibility should be carefully defined.

It is essential for the European Union and its Member States to develop educational

campaigns, information programmes and access to reliable sources. **Investing in digital communication education, promoting digital literacy and encouraging the dissemination of facts-based information are essential steps for tackling disinformation.**

Ultimately, strengthening democracy and fighting disinformation requires a multifaceted approach. International cooperation, effective regulation and empowering citizens to discern information are key elements in this fight. If we want to preserve the fundamental pillars of democracy, **it is imperative to address this global challenge resolutely, together.** This is a collective commitment to ensure a democratic and informed future, where the truth prevails over manipulation.



# Independent journalistic content is the best antidote to disinformation



**Renate SCHROEDER**  
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Federation of  
Journalists (EFJ)

Renate Schroeder © European  
Federation of Journalists



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We are living in uncertain times where facts and fiction merge, where journalists are no longer the gatekeepers of information and news. **We are living in a fragile information ecosystem**, in which the large online platforms, in short Big Tech, have a dominant position and pursue their potent and pervasive attention-driven business model. People like to read content ‘for free’ and pay a high price: A huge data sale in a few concentrated hands and an increasingly poisoned social media, in which facts do not matter. A much cited study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from 2018 found that social media is designed to spread lies six times faster than truth to keep users scrolling.

With the additional threat of deep fakes and generative AI-produced content, the amount of dis- and misinformation is threatening the fundamental values of our democracies. In a bumper election year, in which one of the fundamental conditions for its fairness is access to independent and plural information, to journalistic content, we – journalists groups and civil society alike – are worried. While populists and autocrats do everything to silence and smear independent journalists, the latter work under increasingly precarious and dangerous conditions. Yet, **journalists’ professional work is more important than ever**.

It is in the DNA of journalists to debunk disinformation and hold the powerful to account, to report, analyse and conduct interviews with candidates for elections. Who else provides impartial information about them? But resources in the newsrooms are shrinking. Artificial intelligence is potentially a great tool, but only if all actors are trained and journalistic control assured. The lack of volatility of independent journalism and media is counterproductive.

Some governments have adopted laws against disinformation and ‘fake news’ as a pretext to silence journalists.

‘Tackling disinformation must never be about controlling information. We need a sound, appropriately well-balanced policy approach to ensure citizens have the benefit of an open and robust information environment in which they can debate freely and build consensus...’, rightly said OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann when presenting the excellent brochure on **Facts not fakes: Tackling disinformation, strengthening information integrity**.

**Not censorship but independent journalistic content is the best antidote to disinformation.** This is the European Federation of Journalists’ credo, advocating for journalism as a public good. EU policies need to ensure the accountability and transparency of online platforms, and help build citizens’ media literacy to encourage critical consumption of content and stand up for journalism as a public good. EU decision-makers also need to make sure that the platforms are not the final arbitrators of journalistic content. The Digital Service Act is a first crucial step and transparent implementation now is paramount. The European Media Freedom Act, just adopted by the European Parliament, is needed to protect journalists from undue interference.

For meaningful participatory democracy, including fair elections, access to information, people’s right to know, media freedom and media pluralism, local independent journalism and media literacy are essential.

Support and cooperation with independent fact-checker organisations, civil society, media literacy organisations, with AI experts, academics, press and media councils and media authorities are a must if we want to fight disinformation, create a healthy information ecosystem built on facts, not fiction, and maintain healthy democracies in Europe.

# REFLECTIONS

## Citizens' wellbeing is the cornerstone of a strong and prosperous Europe



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Health SOSTE

Eija Koivuranta  
© Väestöliitto, Meeri Utti

The European Union has an exciting spring ahead of it, with the June elections setting the EU's course for the next five years. The aim must be a stronger Union that seeks to reduce inequality, strengthen inclusion and ensure sustainable development.

The Finnish umbrella organisation for social and health organisations, [SOSTE](#)<sup>1</sup>, has set four main objectives for the upcoming parliamentary term:

1. Towards a European economy of wellbeing
2. Strengthening the EU's common health policy
3. A free and strong civil society as the foundation of democracy
4. The need to clarify the public procurement directive

### The economy of wellbeing as part of EU economic governance

**In a wellbeing economy, the value of investments is not measured in GDP alone.**

There is also a need for indicators such as equality, participation and environmental sustainability that show how societies and communities have managed to invest in the wellbeing and resources of people. Investment in wellbeing underpins not only the steady development of society, but also economic growth.

When discussing public debt, great importance must be attached to people's wellbeing and the future of our planet. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, public debt ensured Finland's economic resilience by providing automatic stabilisers and enabling expansionary economic policies to be pursued. At the same time, debt must always be kept under control, otherwise, over time, it will pose a threat to welfare policies and place a burden on people in future.

With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important **to integrate the economy of wellbeing into the EU's economic governance.** As Finland's public debt rose to around 75% of GDP as a result of factors



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including the pandemic, the European Commission has recommended that it carry out a fiscal adjustment, including cuts to welfare expenditure. In deciding where the adjustment will be made, inevitably a position is taken on the impact on income distribution. Severe welfare cuts are likely to increase poverty and inequality, even if successful in improving incentives to work. Depending on where the cuts are made and how big they are, they may be at odds with the EU's 2017 target for Member States to reduce poverty by 15 million by 2030<sup>2</sup>. Incorporating the economy of wellbeing into the EU's economic governance could mitigate such contradictions and contribute to future European prosperity and economic growth.

### A free and strong civil society is all the more important in a crisis

The elections will also determine the future of civil society. There is a risk of extremist populist forces gaining a stronger foothold in the European Parliament and shrinking the space for civil society in Europe. In order to combat this, the EU needs a civil society strategy that promotes inclusion. **All EU countries must be able to have a strong, diverse and independent civil society** that creates the conditions for socially sustainable development, democracy and human rights. Local democratic structures and processes also need to be supported.

The need for civic engagement is even greater in a crisis. Europe has faced major challenges in recent years, with increasing distress, poverty and inequality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Without the support and assistance of NGOs and

volunteers, current levels of distress and needs would be much greater. **Solidarity with each**

**other is a value that needs to be cherished and passed on from one generation to the next.**

The importance of civic engagement in fostering and creating societies' wellbeing should be widely acknowledged and taken into account in funding too. Civil society must be more closely involved in designing funding programmes as it receives resources from those programmes.

Relatively low levels of inequality, the family-friendliness of society, ensuring a safe environment for children to grow up in, equal access to education, gender equality, availability of social and health services, healthy ageing and high participation have contributed to success in Europe. All this may have been in mind when Finland was named the world's happiest country for the seventh year in a row, with the Nordic countries coming top overall. The things that increase happiness and wellbeing should continue to be nurtured.



1 SOSTE, <https://www.soste.fi/en/etusivu/>

2 European Commission, The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, <https://europa.eu/lqqwgGW>

# NEWS FROM THE GROUP

## Civil Society Organisations' Group partners with EAPN for presentation of 2023 Poverty Watch Report

The fight against poverty and the role of civil society organisations in combating poverty continue to be the overriding priorities of the Civil Society Organisations' Group in 2024. That is why the Group partnered with the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN<sup>1</sup>) to organise the [launch event](#)<sup>2</sup> for the Poverty Watch Report 2023 on 8 April.

The European Poverty Watch Report is a compilation of data and analysis from the EAPN's national reports, setting out the results of bottom-up research by EAPN members. The EAPN report is an evidence based account of the current trends and policies on poverty and social exclusion in Europe, with concrete recommendations on EAPN priorities. Every year, this exercise, the EAPN's key advocacy tool, describes poverty as a multidimensional concept at the top of the political agenda, addresses the root causes of poverty and amplifies the voices of people experiencing poverty at both national and regional levels.

The drafting of the 2023 European Poverty Watch report coincided with an anticipated return to austerity measures, as Member States are compelled to adhere to the 3% deficit to GDP ratio under the [Stability and Growth Pact](#)<sup>3</sup>.

The launch event put a spotlight on **national austerity reforms** driven by the new economic governance review. It was an opportunity for the EAPN to present its key findings on European Member States' public expenditure choices and reforms aimed at investing in sustainable welfare states and the implementation of the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#)<sup>4</sup>, monitored through the [European Semester](#)<sup>5</sup>. Ways to sustainably finance welfare states were discussed and



EAPN President Carlos Susias addressing the audience © EESC

recommendations put forward to European and national decision-makers.

The **report reveals** that national statistics and 2023 National Poverty Watches reports still detect high poverty and social exclusion rates across European countries, which are heavily impacted by the rising cost of living. It makes 11 recommendations regarding EU policy measures.

Two Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group spoke at the event launching the report. Vice President **Pietro Vittorio Barbieri** highlighted the need to address poverty at European and national level, as in the latest Eurobarometer surveys European citizens called on the new European Parliament to make the fight against poverty and social exclusion one of its top priorities. Civil society organisations (CSOs) would anticipate additional financial difficulties and challenges that individuals will face to live a life in dignity, if austerity measures are to be implemented. "The Civil Society Organisations' Group has made combatting poverty and the role of civil society organisations in combatting poverty its overarching priorities," he said. He assured

participants that the Group would continue to work with the EAPN to fight poverty.

The **national reports** (National Poverty Watches) depict indeed an **alarming situation**, emphasising food insecurity, lack of access to and maintenance of housing and lack of access to health, energy and water in many European countries.

The rapporteur for the [EESC opinion](#)<sup>6</sup> on *The European Pillar of Social Rights – evaluation of the initial implementation and recommendations for the future*, **Bernd Schlüter**, reported on the EESC's work and demands for European politics to be given a social dimension and stressed the **importance of upward convergence**. Protecting future generations from high public debts and inefficient social bureaucracies was important, but, especially in times of crisis, **social investments** were also needed. 'The social infrastructure with social services is a **stability factor** in times of crisis,' he said, calling for the **stability rules** to be adjusted. Measures would be a matter not only for the Economic and Financial Affairs Council configuration [ECOFIN](#)<sup>7</sup>, but also for social and health policies.

1 European Anti Poverty Network, <https://european-anti-poverty-network.eu/>

2 EESC, launch event, <https://europa.eu/dJpkBf>

3 European Commission, Stability and Growth Pact, <https://europa.eu/kVj7CN>

4 European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, <https://europa.eu/BqRDx7>

5 European Commission, European Semester, <https://europa.eu/lbVprrR>

6 EESC, opinion SOC/614, <https://europa.eu/Nm66cY>

7 Council, ECOFIN, <https://europa.eu/lmMgHGp>

## Civil society representatives trust European Parliament to continue as driving force for an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue

A properly structured civil dialogue can be a means of making European democracies more resilient to current societal challenges. **Civil society organisations (CSOs) trust in the European Parliament to be the driving force when it comes to an agreement on structured civil dialogue between the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament, as a Parliament resolution**

**proposed such an agreement in 2022.** CSOs consider such an inter-institutional agreement a basis for developing more inclusive and qualitative policy-making.

A first step towards such an agreement would be to set up a **working group** with all relevant stakeholders, including the EU institutions. This working group should co-create the blueprints for a more enabling and systemic environment

for CSO involvement. **Citizen participation** through citizens' panels, for instance, is equally important. It should be further developed and could complement civil dialogue as part of a wider effort to strengthen participatory democracy.

With civil dialogue remaining patchy and unstructured across the European institutions, CSOs have been advocating for a structured



civil dialogue for decades, with the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (CoFoE)<sup>1</sup> and its final recommendations in mid-2022 creating a momentum for progress. Since then, significant progress has been made in charting out the way forward for civil dialogue in an EESC [opinion](#)<sup>2</sup> requested by the [Belgian Presidency](#)<sup>3</sup> of the Council of the EU. This momentum must not be lost, concluded a [conference](#)<sup>4</sup> organised by the [Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee](#) (EESC) on 25 March 2024. The conference explored how the EU as a whole, and Member States individually, could work towards effective sustainable civil dialogue and participatory democracy.

**Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, kicked off the event by reiterating that to harness CSOs' potential – to identify sustainable solutions to societal challenges – in an effective, inclusive and transparent way, their **proper recognition** and involvement in a **structured civil dialogue** was needed. He emphasised that his Group could help promote, facilitate and support contacts between CSOs, on the one hand, and the EU institutions, on the other.



Pedro Silva Pereira and Séamus Boland © EESC

**Mr Boland** maintained: 'The EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group will continue its efforts to implement the proposals for a structured, regular, transparent and inclusive civil dialogue in all policy areas, as put forward by 156 civil society signatories from 26 Member States in an Open Letter to the EU institutions<sup>5</sup> that our Group initiated at the beginning of the year.'

The [Open Letter](#) on civil dialogue and a recently adopted EESC opinion on 'Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward'<sup>6</sup> were presented at the conference. The signatories of the Open Letter #EUCivilDialogueNow call on the EU institutions to:

- initiate an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue;
- establish within each institution leadership positions in charge of relations with civil society;
- encourage and promote greater cooperation between civil and social actors.

This should be achieved while at the same time respecting representative democracy and the

prerogatives of the social partners in social dialogue. The letter calls for more structured cooperation between all actors to the benefit and in the interest of all.

Many participants expressed their support for the proposals of the Open Letter and the EESC opinion. As **Mr Boland** welcomed this support, he reflected on **ways to implement the proposals**, saying: 'As a first step, we call for the creation of a working group on civil dialogue.' **The EESC would be best placed to facilitate such a group**, because of its advisory role, expertise and links to European civil society networks and CSOs in the Member States.

A structured civil dialogue was essential for informed and evidence-based policy-making, said **Gabriella Civico**, President of Civil Society Europe, the European umbrella organisation that co-initiated the Open Letter. 'Participation ranges from providing input to policy and legislative proposals to agenda setting,' she explained. 'It should not be confused with a survey or box-ticking exercise. A participation **culture must permeate from the top to the bottom of the institutions**. It must rely on structure, regularity, openness, legitimacy and inclusiveness, as part of the full implementation of Article 11 (1) and (2) of the Treaty on European Union.'



Dubravka Šuica © EESC

**Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, contributed to the conference with a video message, in which she welcomed the EESC opinion and the Open letter initiated by the Civil Society Organisations' Group and Civil Society Europe. **Ms Šuica** stressed the European Commission's commitment to maintaining an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. She said: 'We are committed to further improving the European consultation and dialogue toolbox. This work should not duplicate the work already covered by existing well-established mechanisms. Indeed, we should make every effort to ensure that those established mechanisms deliver the most meaningful results possible.' The Commission's efforts to follow up on the recommendations of the CoFoE on civil society and citizen engagement included the organisation of European citizens' panels and a child participation platform.

**Pedro Silva Pereira**, Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of participative democracy and citizens' panels, said: 'The European Parliament has been a natural partner in supporting and valuing civil society organisations' role in shaping Europe's policies and priorities. But **more has to be done**. We have to strengthen the role of civil society organisations and also make sure that more EU bodies and institutions are properly involved in the process. The European Parliament's commitment is clear: **we will continue working hand in hand with civil society**, finding innovative ways to engage with citizens with the aim of bolstering our public space, making it more democratic and inclusive.'



Séamus Boland and Ambassador Willem van de Voorde © EESC

**Ambassador Willem van de Voorde**, from the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU, pointed to Belgium's long-standing tradition of involving civil society in political decision-making at national level. 'Belgium has been at the forefront when it comes to participatory democracy,' he said. 'We now need to consider how we can learn from the **best practices** that exist across the EU in building a more inclusive and representative model at European level.'

Other speakers spoke about the efforts made by the Council, the Commission and the Parliament to engage with citizens and CSOs. It became clear that the provisions of the EU Treaty on civil dialogue can be interpreted in different ways and that existing instruments are perceived differently in terms of their openness, transparency and regularity. A more structured and systemic approach would guarantee better accessibility and coordination, and better results from ongoing initiatives and existing instruments.

The role of civic education, local communities and research in improving citizen and civic participation was highlighted.

The conclusions of this event will feed into the current and future work of the Civil Society Organisations' Group.

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

2 EESC opinion SOC/782, Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, <https://europa.eu/!7P7qXw>

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

4 EESC conference, Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward, <https://europa.eu/!bBjG9c>

5 Joint open letter from the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group and Civil Society Europe, <https://europa.eu/!yG8b6t>

6 EESC opinion SOC/782, Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, <https://europa.eu/!7P7qXw>

## Thematic debate – Nature Restoration Law from the perspective of civil society

At its meeting on 20 March, the Civil Society Organisations' Group held a [debate](#)<sup>1</sup> on the Nature Restoration Law (NRL). Two external experts gave a presentation to introduce the debate: **Sophie Ruyschaert**, from BirdLife International – Europe and Central Asia<sup>2</sup>, and **Niall Curley**, from Copa-Cogeca<sup>3</sup>.

The two invited speakers presented the NRL<sup>4</sup> along with the position of their respective organisations. **Ms Ruyschaert**, in favour of the NRL, highlighted the importance of urgently tackling nature restoration and climate change, the positive and specific targets set in this new law, and the strong support from civil society organisations and the wider public in favour of its implementation.

**Mr Curley**, in opposition to the NRL as it currently stands, argued that nature should be restored but not through an 'ill-conceived piece

of legislation' that was unclear, unrealistic, lacked funding, lacked a proper impact assessment and had not been developed with the relevant stakeholders.

An engaging debate followed, with contributions from the following Civil Society Organisations' Group Members: **Stoyan Tchoukanov, Simo Tiainen, Lutz Ribbe, John Comer, José Manuel Roche Ramo, Francisco Javier Garat Pérez, Panagiotis Champas, Chiara Corazza, Marc Decoster, Arnaud Schwartz, Joe Healy, Jaime Bernis Castells** and **Andris Gobiņš**. They each commented on the advantages and issues of the NRL.

A consensus emerged on the need to both have a sustainable agriculture that ensures food security and protect and restore the environment. The debate showed that the controversy is mostly over the issues



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caused by this specific piece of legislation – especially its design and implementation – but that it is also over the lack of any alternative proposals.

**Ms Ruyschaert** conceded some flaws in the legislative proposal on matters of funding, data gaps and stakeholder involvement. However, she reiterated the urgent need to take action to preserve biodiversity and stressed that no other proposition was on the table. **Mr Curley**, arguing that the flaws of the NRL exceeded the urgency, stated that 'no step is better than a bad step' and reminded Members of the 1992 Habitats Directive<sup>5</sup>, which only 'ticked the boxes'.



Thematic debate - Nature Restoration Law © EESC

- 1 Civil Society Organisations' Group, Thematic debate, Nature Restoration Law, <https://europa.eu/!Qw6QBF>
- 2 BirdLife International works to conserve birds and biodiversity by focusing on species, sites, habitats and ecological sustainability and by engaging people, <https://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/>.
- 3 Copa-Cogeca represents the voice of farmers and agri-food, forestry and fishery cooperatives in the EU, <https://copa-cogeca.eu/>.
- 4 European Commission, Nature Restoration Law, <https://europa.eu/!qFDVgf>.
- 5 European Commission, The Habitats Directive, <https://europa.eu/!xY6xXT>.

## Associational Life Category discusses funding for civil society and intergenerational solidarity

The [Associational Life Category](#)<sup>1</sup> held its first meeting of the year this past 12 March. The meeting started with a discussion on **funding possibilities for civil society organisations**, which was moderated by **Andris Gobiņš**, co-spokesperson of the EESC's Category.

**Ionut Sibian**, Member of the Category, opened the exchange by giving an update on the content of a new European Commission proposal concerning the EEA<sup>2</sup> and Norway grants<sup>3</sup>. These grants are funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, and provide for funding possibilities for civil society in several EU Member States. Category Members then exchanged views on access to funding in their own organisations and Member States, discussing, among other things, various existing funding sources, the insecurities linked to project-based funding, and important administrative burdens.

The second panel of the day was dedicated

to a debate on **promoting intergenerational solidarity** and was moderated by **Andreas Kruse**. 'Normally, intergenerational solidarity is recognised in its importance for the family and social environment... Yet the fruitful, inspiring coexistence of the generations – as demonstrated in intergenerational projects – can have a stimulating function for democracy', **Mr Kruse** stated. Members **Pietro Barbieri**, **Katrina Leitāne**, **Neza Repanšek** and **Kinga Joó** also contributed to the debate, underlining, among other aspects, the role of civil society organisations in promoting intergenerational projects, the potential benefits across generations, the fact that innovations can originate in all generations, the impacts of demo-



Meeting of the Associational Life Category on 12 March 2024 © EESC

graphic changes, and questions surrounding the political representation of children and the concept of intergenerational justice.

The Category meeting gave Members the opportunity to discuss topical questions, with several Members giving updates on **ongoing EESC legislative files**. The next meeting will take place on **2 July 2024**.

- 1 EESC, Associational Life category, <https://europa.eu/!VD38XB>
- 2 European Economic Area
- 3 EEA and Norway Grants, <https://eeagrants.org/about-us>

# MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The European Economic and Social Committee and the European Parliament signed a Memorandum of Understanding<sup>1</sup> on **cooperation in preparation for the European elections**, scheduled for June 6-9, 2024. The partnership aims to deepen the cooperation between the two institutions to promote European elections, **boost voters turnout** – especially among non-voters and first-time voters – and **counter information manipulation**. In this dedicated section - Members in the spotlight - you will read some reports on selected outreach activities by Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group under this Memorandum of Understanding.



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1 EESC and EP Memorandum of Understanding, cooperation in preparation for the European elections, <https://europa.eu/!JVMcGg>

## What's on the equality agenda in the EU elections



From left to right: Sæif Holst, Juliane Marie Neiiendam and Maria Jose Landeira Østergård

### Juliane Marie NEIENDAM (DK)

Member, Board of the Women's Council in Denmark

### Sif HOLST (DK)

Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations' Group  
Vice-Chair, Disabled People's Organisations  
Denmark

On 7 April, the Women's Council in Denmark<sup>1</sup> held its 125-year General Assembly (GA) at the Worker's Museum in Copenhagen. During the GA, our Danish Member **Juliane Marie Neiiendam** had organised an EU election and awareness

event. The great hall was decorated with EU flags and banners, as our Danish Members, **Sif Holst** and **Juliane Marie Neiiendam**, gave a presentation on the EESC and the EU focus on Equality to more than 48 organisations.

The presentation included a film from the **campaign against gender stereotypes**<sup>2</sup> and examples of equal pay challenges, and highlighted the EU directives on work-life balance, salary transparency, gender balance on boards, and combatting violence against women.

The Chairwoman of the Women's Council, **Maria José Landeira Østergård**, stated: "It was an enlightening presentation about the EESC as advisory body, how the EESC works and the impact of this work on many subjects including gender equality, human rights including rights for people with



Group photo

disabilities, violence against women and much more."

"The Women's Council Denmark benefited from the presentation and discussion at our Annual General Assembly meeting, as part of our campaign **"Take a stand on Equality when you vote for the future EU"**. A campaign, which focuses on encouraging women and especially young women to vote in the EU elections to ensure a continued focus on Equality in the world around us."

1 Women's Council Denmark, Kvinderådet, <https://kvinderaadet.dk/the-womens-council-in-denmark/>

2 European Union, #EndGenderStereotypes campaign, <https://europa.eu/!x4gChY>

## The EESC and the challenges of grassroots participation in the democratic process



Luca Jahier © EESC

### Luca JAHIER (IT)

Former President, EESC  
Journalist, political analyst, expert in the field of associations, social advancement and the third sector, International relations department, Christian Associations of Italian Workers (ACLI)

On Monday 18 March, Luca Jahier delivered a two-hour lecture at La Sapienza University in Rome on the subject of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the challenges of grassroots participation in the European democratic process.

The event was part of the eighth Europe Dialogues series organised by La Sapienza's Department of Political Science, with a week of lectures, dialogues and seminars amounting to more than 40 events, led

by teachers and professors from the university and covering different aspects of the European Union's policies and the challenges it faces.

During his participatory lecture, Luca Jahier began by explaining the origins and set-up of the **EESC**, its main areas of action and how its remit has developed over time, focusing in particular on its specific role in the EU legislative process, as well as its role as **a hub for the participation of**

**civil society at EU level**, as well as in the different Member States.

He then focused on a number of real success stories arising from the EESC's work over the last two decades, in areas such as the social economy, the circular economy, the protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law, and more recently the [Blue Deal](#)<sup>1</sup>. He pointed out that, in addition to its core task of issuing

opinions, in a range of formats, the EESC very often initiates processes that foster the participation of the social partners and organised civil society, both in Europe and in international relations. Finally, Mr Jahier explained the great innovation that had been introduced by [Article 11 TEU](#)<sup>2</sup>, and spoke about the EESC's many opinions on its implementation. He also spoke about the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>3</sup> and the 'non-paper' that he

had signed with the President of the Committee of the Regions to propose a system of consultation structured around the Commission's annual legislative programme. Mr Jahier concluded that **'Without participatory democracy, democracy is incomplete, but without institutions, participatory democracy has no outlets and the EESC provides exactly that institutional dimension of European civil dialogue.'**

1 EESC, declaration on EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!qgk7Yn>

2 EUR-Lex, Consolidated version of the Treaty on EU, <https://europa.eu/!G4N6nV>

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

## Responsible communication and responsibility for communication



Thierry Libaert © EESC

**Thierry LIBAERT (FR)**

Co-spokesperson,  
EESC Consumers and  
Environment Category  
Representative,  
Fondation pour la  
Nature et Homme NGO  
Scientific Collaborator,  
Catholic University of  
Louvain



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The European Commission asked a small team of communication experts in the European Union, a team of which I was a member, to think about changes that could be made to communication jobs in order to make them more compatible with the challenges of the green transition.

The objective, which was very specific, was to provide communication professionals

in Europe with the tools to allow them to take a more sustainable approach to their activities. This concerns the messages conveyed, especially to avoid misleading environmental claims, but also because all communication activities have a significant environmental impact, particularly in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

The approach was to examine the individual communication activities and to suggest ways to reduce the environmental impact for each of them. For example, internet communication (websites, email, social media), marketing communication,

audiovisual communication, brochures, event communication and many other activities were studied. **A guide for all communication professionals in Europe was then drafted.** This guide, which can be downloaded by everyone for free ([beecom-responsible.com](https://beecom-responsible.com)) is currently available in English, French and Spanish.

At the Communication Commission's (COCOM) meeting held on 14 March 2024, Vice-President Laurențiu Plosceanu asked the entire Communications Directorate of the EESC to implement this responsible approach to communication.

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST EESC PLENARY SESSION

## The future European single market needs a new geopolitical focus and a social pillar

At the March plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 20 March, **former Italian prime minister Enrico Letta** made it clear that the [European single market](#)<sup>1</sup> was first and foremost about people and – 30 years on from its launch – needed to focus on Europe's strategic autonomy and matters such as defence, telecommunications, energy and finance.

The strategic rethinking of the EU single market is now a necessity. The world has changed over the past 30 years and the single market needs to be adapted to the new geopolitical

landscape, said **Mr Letta**, who is President of the Jacques Delors Institute, presenting the main thrust of his **High Level Report on the Future of the Single Market**<sup>2</sup>. The single market was both about people and for people and economic competitiveness had to go hand in hand with social protection.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** stressed that the success of the single market could not be measured in economic terms only but must also mirror European citizens' hopes and wellbeing. Any long-term plan for the single market should focus on both **social and**

**economic convergence**, which requires a collective effort.

Several Members of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group took part in the debate. **Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC's [European Semester Group](#)<sup>3</sup>, agreed with the future focus of the single market suggested by Mr Letta, stressing the need for a **social pillar**. "We need social management and social investment to accompany the ongoing systemic transformation. We also need a large participative involvement of parliaments, local authorities, social partners and civil society,"

1 European Commission, Single market and standards, <https://europa.eu/!Mvp3cP>

2 The High-Level Report on the Future of the Single Market was requested by the European Council on 30 June 2023. The former head of the Italian government, Enrico Letta, was tasked with collecting the positions of European and national bodies as well as employer, trade union and civil society organisations. The main objective was to come up with concrete and ambitious recommendations. The report is expected to be discussed at the European Council's meeting in April 2024 and serve as a basis for action by the future presidencies of the Council, the next European Commission and the Member States.

3 EESC, Ad hoc group on the European Semester, <https://europa.eu/!Bq97bt>

he said. The suggested pillars of the single market would be a condition for Europe's competitiveness and continued prosperity. The report needed to be followed by **decisions and enforcement**.



Elena Calistru © EESC

**Elena Calistru** said that Europe's true competitive edge lies in **its citizens**. For a robust single market, prioritising their active participation, ownership, and ensuring governance transparency was not only wise

but essential. Citizens would be the basis for innovation and resilience in Europe. "We have very educated citizens," Ms Calistru said "But the **brain drain**<sup>1</sup> is something we need to address. It is also relevant when it comes to enlargement and how we think about enlargement."

**Giuseppe Guerini**, co-spokesperson of the EESC's [Social Economy Category](#)<sup>2</sup>, stressed that competition – one of the key pillars of the single market – needed to go hand in hand with **equity, fairness and social justice**. Otherwise, competition would be the oppression of the strong over the weak. He said: "If the single market has been a vehicle for **peace**, it is because equity and social justice have been guiding values for the EU." He asked Mr Letta to keep that in mind when finalising the high-level report.

**Juraj Sipko**, President of the EESC's [International Trade Follow-up Committee](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Thematic Study Group on Economic and](#)



Giuseppe Guerini © EESC

[Fiscal Governance of the Euro Area](#)<sup>4</sup>, praised the empirical analysis and highlighted the need to work on implementation. He asked how science, technology, engineering and mathematics could be used to improve Europe's competitiveness and what Mr Letta felt was needed to complete [European Monetary Union](#)<sup>5</sup>.

- 1 European Commission: The loss suffered by a country as a result of the emigration of a (highly) qualified person., <https://europa.eu/IT3qD4t>
- 2 EESC, Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/lht47UK>
- 3 EESC, International Trade Follow-up Committee, <https://europa.eu/DW97cD>
- 4 EESC, Thematic Study Group, <https://europa.eu/IxqMDmF>
- 5 European Commission, Economic and Monetary Union, <https://europa.eu/IN7ddWg>

## June 2024 Election Alert: EESC Urges Europeans to Vote for a Strong and Democratic Europe

During its plenary session on 20 March, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in a [resolution](#)<sup>1</sup>, called on Europeans to use their democratic right to vote and cast their ballots in the next [European elections](#)<sup>2</sup>, scheduled for 6-9 June 2024.

In a debate on 'The 2024 European elections through a civil society lens', the **EESC said it wanted to mobilise its network of at least 90 million people across the EU and make sure Europeans headed to the polls** to decide who would represent them in the European Parliament over the next five years.

The debate saw the participation of **Thierry Beaudet**, President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, **Zornitsa Roussinova**, President of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council, **Christelle Savall**, President of the Young European Federalists, **Hendrik Nahr**, Head of European Affairs at Make.org, and **Brikena Xhomaqi**, Director at Lifelong Learning Platform.

"The organisations that our Members belong to have deep roots in national civil societies and are best placed to encourage people to vote. We can reach out to everyone and get people to vote, and we must do so; it is our moral duty," as **EESC President Oliver Röpk**e told the plenary. To help boost turnout, the EESC signed a [memorandum of understanding](#)<sup>3</sup> with the European Parliament, to strengthen cooperation ahead of the 2024 European elections.

### The EESC resolution on the European elections

The resolution states that no EU country can cope with challenges like rising inflation, wars, migration or the climate emergency alone; nationalism, populism and single-state solutions are not the answer. Collaboration, cooperation and convergence are.

**Ioannis Vardakastanis**, rapporteur for the resolution, representing the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group (CSOs' Group), made an appeal: "Let's vote for an EU that puts all its citizens at its heart, provides opportunities to everyone, enables them to fulfil their potential and promotes their participation in civic and political life."

Several Members of the EESC's CSOs' Group took the floor, stressing the pivotal role that the European elections would play in the future of the European project and in preserving European values and democracy.

**Séamus Boland**, President of the CSOs' Group, emphasised that national and EU politicians needed to engage with the public in an **open debate on the problems facing the EU** and on what should be done to resolve them. He stressed that many people believed that the EU was only for the few, and **the role of civil society was to persuade them that the EU was for everyone** and that it could continue to create opportunities for all. To do so, **the public needed to feel that they were at the**



Christian Moos © EESC

**centre** not only of the election process, but of the EU itself.

**Christian Moos** stated that EESC Members, as representatives of civil society, needed to spread the word in their constituencies that every vote counted and that **this was not a time for protest elections**. It was time to defend democracy.

Finally, Vice-President **Krzysztof Balon** drew attention to the importance of **awareness-raising activities at national level**, promoted by EESC Members, in order to correctly inform the public about what Europe was all about, although there was still a long way to go in terms of educating people in these matters.



Krzysztof Balon © EESC

- 1 EESC Resolution Vote for a united, democratic, competitive, sustainable and social European Union, <https://europa.eu/IDqWF4r>.
- 2 European Parliament, European elections, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
- 3 Memorandum of understanding signed between the EESC and the European Parliament on close cooperation ahead of the 2024 European elections, <https://europa.eu/UJvMCGq>.

# EESC Unveils Vital Social Strategies for Inclusive Progress Across Europe

The European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) plenary session on 21 March 2024, held a debate on the topic of a **Strong social strategic agenda for Europe**, with **Nicolas Schmit**, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights and **Karine Lalieux**, Belgian Minister of Pensions and Social Integration, in charge of Persons with Disabilities, Combating Poverty and Beliris.



Nicolas Schmit and Karine Lalieux © EESC

Quoting a recent Eurobarometer survey, EESC President **Oliver Röpke** pointed out that the fight against poverty and social exclusion, support for the economy and the creation of new jobs are among the issues most concerning to European citizens.

**Mr Schmit** argued that integrating more people in the labour market requires the social infrastructure allowing them to work, such as child care, elderly care or regularisation of migrants. He strongly emphasised the importance of **upskilling**, which 'is in the interest of the people but above all in the interest of companies' because it is about innovation, competitiveness and better jobs. He concluded by saying that **'investing in fighting poverty is also investing in a better and stronger society and in a stronger economy'**.

**Ms Lalieux** affirmed that a social Europe is a priority of the Belgian Presidency in which the La Hulpe declaration<sup>1</sup> will be central. She asserted that to enhance the single market it is necessary to include the millions of citizens excluded because of their disability or their situation of poverty. Indeed, she pointed

out that **'jobs are the first way to combat poverty'**. She argued that two principles are required to create a social Europe: a fair transition and the inclusion of civil society.



Luca Jahier © EESC

**Luca Jahier**, rapporteur of the opinion [Boosting long-term inclusive growth through reforms and investments](#)<sup>2</sup>, stressed how important social investment is for the economy and added that the scale of the investments needed in the social sector was estimated to be EUR 1.5 billion per year. He called for a European industrial policy.



Séamus Boland © EESC

The President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, **Séamus Boland**, reminded the plenary that the **eradication of poverty is a major priority** of his Group. Given the dire poverty and social exclusion levels in the EU, one can only conclude that growth should be measured beyond GDP levels. He stated that EU social policies must bring more social justice, equality and fairness to the entire EU population.

Several Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group took part in the



Pietro Barbieri © EESC

debate. Vice-President **Pietro Barbieri** drew attention to the importance of involving social stakeholders throughout the process of developing a social Europe.



Corina Murafa © EESC

**Corina Murafa** indicated that 'in the EU between 50 and 100 million people have to choose between eating and heating because they are in energy poverty'. Thus, she called for investments in energy-efficient housing, which would be beneficial socially, environmentally and to competitiveness.

**Alain Coheur** pointed to the importance of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which mentions the protection of workers' rights but also the opportunities for upskilling and reskilling, improving working conditions and reinforcing the social protection mechanism.

**Bernd Schlüter** reminded those present that social policy is cross-cutting, it also concerns competitiveness. He said that the economy is essential for people's quality of life. It is a message for the elections: the EU needs its small-scale industry.

1 Belgian Presidency, Council of the European Union, High-Level Conference: European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://europa.eu/!8bjMGb>.

2 EESC opinion ECO/630, <https://europa.eu/!RKWMqg>.

## EESC discusses humanitarian situation in Gaza

On 21 March 2024, the second day of the March plenary, EESC Members held a debate on the humanitarian situation in Gaza with Ajith Sunghay, Head of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and Sergio Cecchini, Humanitarian Representative to the EU and NATO of Médecins Sans Frontières.

EESC President Oliver Röpke stressed that the humanitarian situation in Gaza demanded prompt action to prevent an even bigger human crisis: 'Civilians are in dire need of

food, water, fuel, electricity and medical care. Ensuring urgent humanitarian aid along with an immediate and sustainable ceasefire is crucial'.

Several Members of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group took part in the debate: Pietro Vittorio Barbieri and Krzysztof Balon, Vice-Presidents of the Group, and Svjetlana Marijon and João Nabais.



Sergio Cecchini © EESC

# WHAT IS EESC OPINION SOC/792 ALL ABOUT?

## An interview with Cristian Pîrvulescu, rapporteur for the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) opinion SOC/792 on 'No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred'

The opinion will be presented and adopted at the May plenary session in 2024.



### Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO)

Honorary President, Pro Democrația association (APD)

Member, Board of Directors, Centre Step by Step

Dean, Faculty of Political Science, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

Cristian Pîrvulescu © EESC

### The work on this opinion is ongoing, but can you already identify its three main findings?

When the European Commission published its communication on '[No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred](#)'<sup>1</sup> in December 2023 as a call for action urging all Europeans to stand up against hatred and speak up for tolerance and respect, it had already become 'profitable' for many political, social and cultural players to utilise hatred. Therefore, if I have to pick out only three of the points and proposals that

Milena Angelova and I made in the opinion, I would choose the following. First, we stress that various players and states spread and incite hatred to undermine democracy, human rights and trust in the EU institutions and the Member States. Second, we think the EESC must reiterate its position that hate speech and hate crimes are criminal offences that meet the criteria set out in [Article 83\(1\) TFEU](#)<sup>2</sup> and should therefore

be included in the list of crimes criminalised by the EU. Third, we call on the Member States to step up their efforts to prosecute hate speech and hate crimes and to fully inform members of the public of the definition of hate and encourage them to report it to law enforcement authorities.

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

Taking the right legal and societal approach to this problem at EU level is vital for the survival of liberal democracy. Because we are convinced that this can be done, we recommend creating a network of national law enforcement contact points specialising in investigating hate speech and hate crimes, to improve coordination with

work at EU level. In this sense, we believe that recognising and supporting the role of social partners and civil society organisations is crucial. Even though the Communication points to several initiatives and programmes involving communities and civil society organisations, these are far from the comprehensive

partnership needed to effectively address the issue of hate. In addition, more resources should be directed towards incident reporting, mediation with law enforcement authorities, legal aid and assistance in dealing with the effects of hate.

### After the adoption of this opinion, what will you do to promote it?

I was already invited, as part of the collaboration with the European Commission, to present the opinion at the citizens' panels in April. Moreover, there is an opportunity to organise

a cultural event as a follow-up to our opinion, possibly as part of a high-level event that the Commission will hold in May.

The final EESC opinion on 'No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred' will be available after the May plenary session at: <https://europa.eu/BWTMbP>

1 European Commission, Press release: No place for Hate, <https://europa.eu/IN6jPyN>

2 EUR-Lex, Article 83 TFEU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E083>

## UPCOMING EVENTS



**04/05/2024**

Celebrate Europe Day and learn about the EESC: Open Doors Day on 4 May: <https://europa.eu/!7GcfrP>

**07/05/2024**

8th edition of the Day of the Liberal Professions 2024 - Conference of the EESC Liberal Professions' Category on 'Professional Support for the EU Blue Deal'; <https://europa.eu/!Fj6cjk>

**04/06/2024**

Conference on 'The State of Health in the EU': <https://europa.eu/!g8KJtC>

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# OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 20 and 21 March 2024. The EESC plenary adopted 11 opinions and 1 resolution of which 7 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

**Danko RELIĆ (HR)**, rapporteur, [CCMI/221](#)<sup>1</sup> Communication on availability of medicines

**Danko RELIĆ (HR)**, rapporteur-general, [INT/1060](#)<sup>2</sup> Medical devices/Eudamed

**Ileana IZVERNICEANU DE LA IGLESIA (ES)**, rapporteur, [TEN/825](#)<sup>3</sup> Review of the passengers' rights framework.

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**, rapporteur, [Resolution Vote for a united, democratic, competitive, sustainable and social European Union](#)<sup>4</sup>.

**John COMER (IE)**, rapporteur, [NAT/911](#)<sup>5</sup> Chemicals – 'One Substance, One Assessment'

**Luca JAHIER (IT)**, rapporteur, [ECO/630](#)<sup>6</sup> Boosting long-term inclusive growth through reforms and investment

**Maciej Dawid KUNYSZ (PL)**, rapporteur, [NAT/922](#)<sup>7</sup> Regulation on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability

1 EESC opinion CCMI/221, <https://europa.eu/lwYNRN>

2 EESC opinion INT/1060, <https://europa.eu/lmNYym8>

3 EESC opinion TEN/825, <https://europa.eu/lY7XhT3>

4 EESC resolution, <https://europa.eu/lDgWF4r>

5 EESC opinion NAT/911, <https://europa.eu/lc8qjfk>

6 EESC opinion ECO/630, <https://europa.eu/lRkWMq9>

7 EESC opinion NAT/922, <https://europa.eu/lmkYX6x>

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the [Committee's website](#)<sup>8</sup>

The **next EESC plenary session** will take place on **30 and 31 May 2024**. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit [our website](#)<sup>9</sup>.

A list including all **new work appointments** of Civil Society Organisations' Group Members is available on the [Committee's website](#)<sup>10</sup>.

8 EESC opinions, <https://europa.eu/lwF86wY>

9 EESC plenary sessions, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/plenary-sessions>

10 EESC, New work appointments, <https://europa.eu/lPBjNwW>



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