



REX newsletter | The EESC in the world

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Dear Reader,

The **Section for External Relations** is responsible for expressing the views of organised civil society on issues related to the EU's external action and trade policy. Considering the current speed of change, a very dynamic mandate: just think of all the new agreements the EU is negotiating with third countries, or of the fragilities around us, with two terrible wars whose end is not yet in sight.

This year will be marked by the **European Parliament elections** (6-9 June), with our Committee playing its part to improve voter turnout and contribute to a genuine democratic debate. In April, the REX section will be holding the second **conference against disinformation** in Chişinău, Moldova. We will be in a candidate country that is working hard to protect itself from foreign information manipulation and interference, and we will give a helping hand with a debate and exchange of experiences between EU and Moldovan civil society.

In this **Election Year**, when half of the world's population will be called to the polls, we have also seen the 'non-elections' in Russia. Luckily, other elections will be real. National elections are scheduled in our Member States, as well as in the United Kingdom, India, Mexico, South Africa and South Korea. In November it will be the **United States'** turn, and a lot is at stake. We might see a continuation of EU-US cooperation on important issues like bilateral trade, actions for a greener future, support to Ukraine and the search for solutions to the Middle East conflict, but we could also see a return to a situation in which the US loses interest in international matters, meaning the EU needs to prepare itself for a potential new world. Defence must be one of the highest priorities if EU wants not only to protect European citizens, but also to prove that it is still an important global player.

The **European model**, comprising democratic values, multilateralism, development cooperation, peace-building and free trade, needs to be supported by a **resolute external action**, which builds up new partnerships, in order to stabilise the regions surrounding us and to contribute to the currently endangered rule-based world order. To do this, the Union must proceed on the path of **enlargement**, following merit-based procedures, but without unnecessarily delaying membership for those who are ready. This goes for several Western Balkan countries and for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. On their side, the candidate countries must prove that they are ready to be part of the European future, and this requires hard efforts. The EESC is preparing, for example with the **Enlargement Candidate**

Members initiative launched by our President: representatives from civil society of the candidate countries will be associated to the elaboration phase of key opinions as of next month.

The **Mediterranean** is a strategic area for Europe due to its vicinity, young population and great economic potential, also in terms of green energy supply. However, a lack of future perspectives could lead to instability and increased migration. Global warming is endangering the southern shore of our common sea, as well as the Sahel area and beyond. We have the capacities, the interest and the historic and moral duty to cooperate with African and Middle Eastern countries on all issues concerning our common future. In fact, Europe needs deeper relations all over the world, especially with like-minded countries and regional organisations, like **Mercosur** and **ASEAN**. We need to continue our dialogue with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and to develop cooperation with strategic areas like **Central Asia**, which has shown a keen interest in the EU.

The REX section will contribute to these aims by continuing to promote a favourable framework for the activities of civil society organisations, and support civil and social dialogue in non-EU countries and regions.



Yours sincerely,

Dimitris Dimitriadis
REX Section President

Enlargement



The **Enlargement Candidate Members** initiative, launched through the [EESC president's manifesto](#) in 2023, aims to involve civil society representatives from EU candidate countries in the EESC's legislative work. The countries involved are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine.

The initiative was officially launched at our plenary session on 15 February 2024, with the first ECMs set to start working on selected EESC opinions in April 2024. More information can be found [here](#).

Eastern Partnership



Relations with Armenia in their third year

The **EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform (CSP)**, established under the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), held its 4th meeting on 14 March 2024 in Yerevan. On the programme was a discussion on the state of democratic institutions in Armenia, and on the implementation of Chapter 10 of the CEPA

on Agriculture and Rural development. CSP members were able to exchange views on these topics with the representatives of Armenian and EU authorities, as well as with experts from civil society.

Prior to the meeting, the EU side of the platform met with the members of the **Armenian National Assembly** who belong to the EU integration committee and who work on issues related to the Armenia's European future, together with their counterparts from the European Parliament. The European members of the CSP also had a unique chance to visit a **refugee centre** accommodating more than 100 displaced Armenians from **Nagorno-Karabakh**. Their personal stories touched every member of the delegation. The centre is located in Metsamor, a municipality some 40 km from Yerevan. The project is led by the Czech NGO People in Need, and supported by the EU Delegation in Armenia. The next CSP meeting will be held in Brussels, in Autumn 2024.



The Southern Neighbourhood and the Middle East

Plenary debate on the crisis in the Middle East

At its Plenary Session of 21 March 2024, the EESC held a debate on the **humanitarian situation in Gaza**. Our Committee's president, **Oliver Röpke**, reiterated that the EESC condemned all acts directed against Israeli and Palestinian civilians, starting with the terrorist attacks committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023, which killed 1 200 people. He underlined that the Committee had repeatedly asked for the release of all hostages without any preconditions, and for the safeguard of their welfare with the help of the International Red Cross, the International Red Crescent and Médecins Sans Frontières. Mr Röpke referred to his meeting with Pramila Patten, UN special representative for sexual violence in conflict, and spoke of the violence against women in Gaza and the West Bank. Finally, he mentioned the levels of food insecurity currently affecting 1.2 million Palestinians, with 64% of households having only one meal per day.

Ajith Sunghay, head of office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, highlighted that the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip faced immediate starvation, and deplored the lack of protection for humanitarian aid workers, adding that collective punishment could not be accepted as a matter of warfare. He urged EESC members to support an immediate ceasefire and the end of attacks on humanitarian aid workers, and for their visas to be extended.

Sergio Cecchini, Médecins Sans Frontières humanitarian representative to the EU and NATO, pointed out that vital food supplies were blocked at Gaza's border with Egypt, and asked for the immediate opening of the Rafah crossing. He also revealed that a large number of Médecins Sans Frontières staff had been displaced and even abducted while on duty, in violation of UN resolution 2286 (2016) on the protection of the wounded and sick,

medical personnel and humanitarian personnel in armed conflict. Finally, he urged members to call for an immediate ceasefire and to ensure that vital aid could enter Gaza as soon as possible.

In the ensuing debate, EESC members observed that the EU Member States should actively push for a rapid and sufficient supply of aid to Gaza, for a permanent ceasefire and for a two-state solution, reiterating that human rights must be respected at all times, that children living in the Gaza Strip needed aid and psychological support, that hostages needed to be released in order for Israelis and Palestinians to live side-by-side peacefully, and that famine was imminent in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, with the population facing crisis levels of food insecurity. They also asked about the possible involvement of UNRWA staff in the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October. An international report will be published on 28 April 2024 to clarify the situation.

Mr Röpke ended the debate by underlining the need to support civil society on both sides, and asked for the immediate release of hostages and an immediate ceasefire. He also reiterated the Committee's long-standing request to ensure stability, security and dignity for Palestinians and Israelis. Mr Röpke closed with a call for a two-state solution, as stipulated by all relevant UN resolutions.



Exploratory mission to Algeria

On 6-7 March 2024, a delegation of six EESC members went on an exploratory mission to Algeria. This mission served to re-establish contacts with the **Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Algeria (CNESE)** and prepare the grounds for close cooperation in the future. Among others, the CNESE president accepted the EESC's invitation to the 2024 Euromed Summit in Malta – Algeria's first participation in a Euromed Summit since 2018. In addition, EESC members were able to exchange views on the economic, social and political situation in Algeria with representatives from the EU Delegation to Algeria, several Algerian Ministries, the Algerian Council of Economic Renewal and from the General Union of Algerian Workers. These meetings also offered an excellent opportunity to present the EESC and its numerous activities related to the EU's Southern Neighbourhood.

Feasibility study for a new EU rating agency

The EESC will launch a feasibility study for the establishment of a public EU rating agency for environmental and social sustainability and for human rights in the business context. This agency could provide legal certainty regarding due diligence in global value chains when applying EU legislation. In case you are interested in participating in the **call for tenders** for this study, please contact studies-eesc@eesc.europa.eu. You will find more information about this new study [here](#).



Africa, Caribbean, Pacific (ACP)

The EESC in Angola and the new Samoa Agreement

Between 19 and 21 February, an EESC delegation was in Luanda to take part in the constitutive meeting and 1st session of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly and in the constitutive meetings of three regional Parliamentary Assemblies (EU-Pacific, EU-Caribbean, EU-Africa). The Parliamentary Assemblies are the first institutions to be established under the new Samoa agreement between the EU and ACP countries signed on 15 November 2023.

Our members took the floor in the debates on the following topics: 'Access to Reliable, affordable and Sustainable Energy', 'Climate Finance', 'Protecting the Oceans while ensuring equity in the Blue Economy'. They called for a swift implementation of article 95 of the Samoa agreement on the stakeholder engagement mechanism and insisted on the importance to include the representative bodies of civil society like the EESC.

On the side-lines of the event, the EESC organised, together with the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union, a meeting with representatives of Angolan civil society (youth, human rights and democracy groups, women, farmers, employers and trade unions), with around 70 participants from more than 30 organisations.



Central Asia

Under full sail to Kazakhstan

On 6 February 2024, the **EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-Up Committee** met to discuss visa requirements for Russian civil society activists travelling to EU countries, and the situation of Kazakhstan in view of **own-initiative opinion REX/587** *Action Plan for enhancing cooperation between civil society organisations in the European Union and Kazakhstan, in the framework of the implementation of the New Strategy on Central Asia and of the Global Gateway* (rapporteur: **Dumitru Fornea**).

On **visa requirements for Russian citizens**, the members underscored the need for a balanced approach that takes individual rights into consideration, but does not create security risks connected with a general opening of the borders. On **Kazakhstan**, an insightful analysis of the country's geopolitical position and its relations with major powers was provided by the EEAS and by journalist **Régis Genté**, expert of the post-Soviet space (read the interview with Mr Genté below). The **own-initiative opinion** that the EESC is drafting will include a fact-finding mission to Astana and a study group meeting with a hearing.

A further analysis of the situation in Kazakhstan had been carried out during the January REX section meeting, which included a statement by MEP **Karsten Lucke**, rapporteur of the [Report on the EU strategy on Central Asia](#). The discussions had continued with an

informal meeting between Mr Lucke and the members of the study group on own-initiative opinion REX/587.



Latin America

A joint declaration on EU-Chile relations

The EU-Chile Association Agreement (AA) from 2002 established an **EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee (JCC)** responsible for supervising the application of the AA from a civil society perspective. The JCC continues to play its role, holding its 11th meeting in Santiago de Chile from 30 November to 1 December 2023 to discuss the possible ways to strengthen our bilateral partnership in rapidly evolving global political and economic circumstances. The aim was to **put people first**, underlining the role of civil society in promoting inclusive growth and tackling common challenges, such as economic shocks, climate change, instability, various threats to democracy and the multilateral order. The JCC also exchanged views on the progress of Chile's **constitutional reform**. Moreover, in view of the changes to the legal framework resulting from updates to the EU-Chile AA, the participants discussed proposals on the role of civil society and the status of the JCC following the transition. The JCC also approved a [joint declaration](#).

The EU delegation held meetings with representatives from the Chilean Ministry of Energy, as well as those from the Ministries of Economy, Development and Tourism, to discuss the **green and just transition** and the opportunities created by the **EU Global Gateway** investment agenda. We also seized our opportunity in Santiago to connect with the Chilean civil society organisations not represented in the JCC, and to hear their views about issues including human rights and democracy, migration, gender equality and environmental justice.



The Arctic

REX at the North Pole to discuss geopolitics, the green transition and indigenous rights

From 29 January to 1 February 2024, the REX section sent a four-member delegation to **Tromsø** in northern Norway to participate in the **Arctic Frontiers Conference**, which brings together representatives of science, politics, business and local Arctic communities. The interesting panel discussions focused on issues that significantly affect the future of the region, such as climate change and the warming of the Arctic region, which is occurring three times faster than the global average. Also discussed were the EU's green transition, which could be advanced with the help of rare earth metals found in mines in the north; the right of local communities and indigenous people to be consulted about changes that affect their traditional way of life; and the growing importance of the Arctic as a geostrategic region, especially following Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO.



Trade

The EESC at the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation

Between 26 February and 1 March 2024, an EESC delegation participated in the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in **Abu Dhabi**, where they attended side events such as the daily debriefings for civil society hosted by DG Trade, the Trade and Sustainability Hub organised by the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and the Business Forum organised by the WTO and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). Our members had informal meetings with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the ICC, the US Chamber of Commerce, the Belgian delegation and two Members of the European Parliament from the Committee on International Trade (INTA).

While the EESC's participation was a success, the same unfortunately cannot be said for the outcome of the event. At the 12th Ministerial Conference held in Geneva in 2022, an agreement was drafted on **fisheries subsidies** which, for the first time, incorporated sustainability in a WTO binding text. However, this time around the Members States failed to follow up with a 'second wave' agreement. Talks on the draft agreement will continue in Geneva, in view of the next Ministerial Conference, to be held in Cameroon in 2026. No agreement was reached on **agriculture** or on the reform of the **dispute settlement mechanism**. The only concrete result was the extension of the **moratorium on e-commerce tariffs** until 2026.

The EU's first priority should be consolidating its network of friends and partners. The EESC's International Trade Committee will keep monitoring the developments on all open fronts on behalf of the REX section.

Upcoming events

Citizens can defeat disinformation
Civil society for an open democratic debate

CETĂȚENII POT COMBATE DEZINFORMAREA
Societatea civilă pentru o dezbateră democratică deschisă

18.04.2024 | 09:00 - 13:15

MOLDOVA STATE UNIVERSITY Aula Regina Maria, Strada Alexei Mateevici 60, Chișinău

Cetățenii pot combate dezinformarea, in the candidate countries as well!

The EESC is continuing its work against disinformation, visiting the countries most affected by the phenomenon. After last year's event held in Bulgaria on 12 June (see [issue No 6](#) of this newsletter),

the Committee is going to Moldova for the conference ***Citizens can defeat disinformation: Civil society for an open democratic debate***, which we are organising together with the Moldova State University in Chişinău on 18 April 2024. The event, which will be held in three languages (English, Romanian and Russian), will involve high-level participants from Moldovan and Ukrainian civil society, as well as Moldovan and EU institutions and members of the EESC and of different national economic and social councils. For more information, including the webstreaming links and our social media campaign, you can visit the [website](#).

Public hearing on REX/586 – *Deforestation of the Amazonian forest*

On 30 April 2024, there will be a public hearing to discuss the main topic of opinion REX/586 *Deforestation of the Amazonian forest. Impacts on the climate change and global environment; consequences for companies, workers and population*. Policing actions is not enough to stop the deforestation of the planet's **green lungs**. To preserve the rainforests we need to create different means of subsistence for the local populations. The question is now how to do it. The EESC has decided to draw up an opinion to reflect on this issue, which is affecting the whole world and is responsible for part of the reticence delaying the signing of the **UE-Mercosur trade agreement**.

Throughout 2023, EESC members took part in various EU-Latin American dialogues, from the EU-Latin America and the Caribbean Forum to the EU-CELAC Summit and EuroLat events, meetings with representatives of Latin American parliaments and civil society, and also bi-regional events in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Colombia and the Dominican Republic. The issue of deforestation in the Amazon was raised constantly on these occasions. The document, to be adopted in September 2024, will try to leverage a collaboration with partners and incorporate the views of the representatives from European and Latin American civil society. More information can be found [here](#), including the [webstreaming link](#).

Opinions in the spotlight

[REX/581](#) – *New growth plan and facility for the Western Balkans*

The Commission is proposing a new growth plan for the Western Balkans, based on four pillars and aimed at: enhancing economic integration with the European Union's single market; boosting economic integration through the common regional market; accelerating fundamental reforms and improving sustainable economic growth; and increasing financial assistance to support the reforms through a reform and growth facility for the Western Balkans. The new instrument, worth EUR 6 billion in non-repayable support and loan support, will allow the Western Balkan countries to enjoy the benefits of EU integration ahead of their actual accession. In view of ensuring a level playing field among enlargement countries, it aims to progressively add further opportunities to those available under the existing stabilisation and association agreements.

The EESC was asked by the Commission to produce an opinion on the new plan, highlighting a civil society perspective and exploring means for the concrete inclusion of social partners and civil society organisations in its implementation. A [hearing](#) was organised for 13 March, after which the opinion will be discussed in the REX section on 3 April, and then adopted at the 24-25 April plenary.

[REX/579](#) – *European Economic Security Strategy*

At the February plenary, the EESC adopted the REX opinion on the Commission's communication on the European Economic Security Strategy. The Committee appreciates the communication's approach to address economic security measures and to assess the threats, risks and vulnerabilities, but also calls for analysing and making use of the opportunities provided by the global challenges, based on a comprehensive assessment of the EU's strengths.

The Commission took a holistic approach to addressing European economic resilience, which is welcomed by the EESC. The EU needs to strengthen its competitiveness by forging international partnerships with like-minded countries, and by ensuring a well-functioning single market, including by completing the capital markets union and the banking union.

Ongoing opinions and information reports

[REX/590](#) – Screening of foreign investments in the Union

[REX/586](#) – Deforestation of the Amazon rainforest – impact on climate change and the global environment; consequences for companies, workers and population

[REX/585](#) – Water Politics: Empowering Youth, Women, and Indigenous and Local Communities

[REX/581](#) – New growth plan and Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans

[REX/580](#) – EU-UK Youth Engagement

An interview with Régis Genté

Régis Genté is a French journalist based in Georgia. A specialist of the post-Soviet area, he has written on Russia and Ukraine, the Caucasus countries and Central Asia. He has participated in different EESC initiatives and, during his last visit to the Committee, was interviewed by our Press Unit.

Q. *Half of the planet is going to the polls this year, including the US for its presidential elections, which are of paramount importance. If Donald Trump were to return to the White House, how would this affect EU-transatlantic relations and Russia's war against Ukraine?*

R. Donald Trump's election could be a factor that pushes Russia to extend the war beyond Ukraine, meaning, for example, to start hybrid wars in the Baltic States and to generally start creating a situation to destabilise the region. Also, with Trump in the White House, Moscow would have an ally in weakening if not dismantling NATO and the security architecture built around it. With Trump's return to the White House, and following his statement that he 'would never help Europe if it were attacked', and given what John Bolton, former National Security Advisor (April 2018–September 2019), said about withdrawing the US from NATO, he would probably put EU-transatlantic relations in a state of coma for a while, despite the very likely huge resistance that it would provoke within the US administration.

Q. *How deeply can disinformation influence voters in the upcoming European elections?*

R. Disinformation works as much as the target – we, as Europeans in this case – have weaknesses. Russian disinformation doesn't create the problems; it uses the existing ones. Our societies are going through a deep political and moral crisis, which creates a favourable ground for disinformation. But I feel that as Europeans and as citizens of the world, we are more educated now and experienced on how to handle news on social media than we were 10 years ago. We should not be too pessimistic, because this makes us already the victims of disinformation. Societies are not that naïve anymore, and people are aware that States and other political players can use social networks to manipulate public opinion. On social media, I would say, only minorities are active. The immense majority of the average population, who are educated people, is often silent. And this important number of people is not swallowing every crazy thing that is written on social media.

Q. *Which perspective do you see for the European integration of Ukraine and Moldova?*

R. Europe is very attractive for these countries. It's such a contrast with what we hear in Europe about Europe. Whenever I have been to Ukraine and Moldova over the past twenty years, I could observe

how their societies were polarised over the political model they had to choose – more Russian or more European? But over the years, especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014, even the Eastern part of Ukraine (which is mostly Russian-speaking) started to look more favourably at Europe. Or more negatively at Russia, that brought war in the Donbass, destroyed the local economy and supported brutal and corrupted regimes. So the consensus around Europe increased, despite the fear of making Russia angry. However, this does not apply to Georgia, because there has never been a pro-Russian part. The latest survey shows that 85% of the population is in favour of the EU.

Q. *Georgia was given candidate status. Do you think that the country will manage to continue with the necessary reforms? Do you see any potential for the civil society there?*

R. Georgia has implemented an enormous number of reforms over the last two to three decades. However, the current government has done very little, and the past two years have shown that the real agenda of the country's leadership, that of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, is pro-Russian, with their attempt to impose Russian-inspired laws against 'foreign agents' and LGBTQI rights. I think that there won't be any new EU-inspired reforms in Georgia for the moment. Civil society resists, and thanks to its demonstrations, the government was forced to withdraw the law on foreign agents. But civil society cannot stand without support. They face strong pressure from the State and political forces probably supported by Russia.

Q. *The EU is extending its engagement with Central Asia, given the growing interest of the region. Do you think that a greater EU presence can change the balance of powers in Central Asia?*

R. I think the EU should continue to deepen its relations with Central Asia, promoting its values and culture. In the face of fierce geopolitical competition, with China and Russia trying to keep the region under authoritarian rule, Europe should be itself: democratic and respectful of human rights, engaging these countries in rule of law and social dialogue. What I also observe, especially in Kazakhstan, is that young people there are more connected to the world, and dream to have a better future. Young people and other sectors of society are very gradually forcing those in power to listen more to the people. The 2022 January events in Kazakhstan are very telling in this regard, but there is still a long way to go.



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1040 Brussels
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