FOREWORD

Our Health and the Health of our Democracy

Séamus BOLAND (IE)
President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group

The ‘State of Health in the EU’ will be the topic of a conference organised by the Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) as part of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. This event, in partnership with the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Liège and the Hôpital de la Citadelle in Liège on 4 June, will be a timely conference, coming at a time when many experts are saying that pandemics are likely to occur again. Their reports cite causes such as climate change, international travel and a concerning increased resistance to drugs by viruses.

Equally, there are many unresolved issues relating to health. Cancer continues to be the major cause of death, while coronary-related illnesses continue to affect millions of people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU committed strongly to a European Health Union. Having witnessed the speedy turnaround time for developing a vaccine in the EU and the efficiency with which it was fairly distributed among all EU nations, many health professionals, along with the public, could see the potential for tackling major health issues as a Union. In that context, the conference will analyse whether there is still political commitment for a European Health Union. The conference will also address the potential of digital innovations in health matters and examine the role of social investment in the sustainability of health services. Finally, the event will also look into the global fight against health inadequacies through the prism of European solidarity, specifically noting rare diseases.

There is a connection between health policy and the current cycle of elections in Europe. Indeed, there is reason to be concerned about the health of our democracy. We are all aware of its fragility and there is reason to be concerned about the health of our democracy. We are all aware of its fragility and there is reason to be concerned about the health of our democracy.

Therefore, the election of Members of the European Parliament on 6-9 June will matter a great deal. The European Parliament has come a long way since its inception. With the addition of numerous additional responsibilities that have been assigned over the years, its output now affects almost every part of our lives on a daily basis.

The Parliament’s campaign #UseYourVote, which the EESC is actively supporting with various activities, underlines this reality. As part of this campaign, our Group discussed with multiple European civil society networks what the future of Europe should look like. The written conclusions and recommendations of this event will feed into an EESC resolution with policy recommendations to the new European Parliament and European Commission, to be adopted in July.

In addition, I was honoured to speak to an Engineers’ Association in Copenhagen at the end of June. It was a lively audience and it was heartening to see the participants’ huge concern for the EU, particularly in upholding the values of equality and social justice. In a similar vein, I organised an outreach event in Tullamore, Ireland. Here there was a gathering of almost 60 young people, whose insights and concerns about their future in a rapidly evolving EU were of great interest. Their major concerns included the challenges of climate change, the challenges posed by the rapid advances being made by digitalisation and the reality of false information. Those events will definitely feed into my work at both national and European level and helped raise awareness about the importance of the European elections.

In the meantime, the Civil Society Organisations’ Group is determined to continue its campaign to ensure that civil society organisations (CSOs) have regular, structured and transparent access to activities which the EESC is actively supporting with various activities. Underlines this reality. As part of this campaign, our Group discussed with multiple European civil society networks what the future of Europe should look like. The written conclusions and recommendations of this event will feed into an EESC resolution with policy recommendations to the new European Parliament and European Commission, to be adopted in July.

Séamus Boland

---

6. EESC, conference on Building together the EU we want, conclusions and recommendations. [https://europa.eu/NetCJIII](https://europa.eu/NetCJIII)
7. EESC, CSO Group, Open Letter, [https://europa.eu/ithCmWR](https://europa.eu/ithCmWR)
Paving the way for a flagship health initiative: from a European guarantee to ambitious united action by civil society

At a time when the European Union is navigating a maze of complex health issues, the idea of a ‘European Care Guarantee’ is indeed something that is clearly needed for well-being.

Taking inspiration from the established frameworks of the Youth Guarantee and the Child Guarantee, the proposal to establish a care guarantee has been at the heart of several opinions drawn up by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Given the current challenges in this area (demographic change, the health-environment nexus, the silent pandemic of mental health issues and non-communicable diseases, insufficient large-scale investments), the calls to tackle the issue of health holistically are stronger than ever, with a view to ensuring that every citizen has access to a continuum of care, combining prevention, treatment, support and rehabilitation. This kind of integrated framework has the potential to deliver more accessible and higher-quality healthcare and to strengthen the resilience of health systems, leaving behind the silo-based approach.

Setting this up would be in line with the European flagship initiative for health* proposed by the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group. This initiative is focused on developing a well-being economy that promotes fairness, solidarity and social justice, advancing the four pillars of a transition that is environmentally sustainable, digitally inclusive, economically sustainable and socially fair ... Taking this approach would mean that policies could tackle the root causes of inequalities that are multifaceted, and pave the way to a sustainable, responsive and innovative health ecosystem in the EU and beyond.

The ‘European Care Guarantee’ can simultaneously strengthen the European Health Union, respond to citizens’ aspirations and meet the needs of society. Both the European guarantee and the flagship initiative constitute a unique opportunity to galvanise efforts to build a future Europe that has health and human rights at its heart.

With a view to the forthcoming EU strategic agenda for 2024-2029*, the EESC must provide the impetus behind a collective drive to ensure that universal health coverage transcends rhetoric and becomes a reality driven by all of civil society, for all citizens, and delivering a tangible answer to the need for health to be consistently factored into all policies.

2. European Commission, EU Youth Guarantee, https://europa.eu/!yQH6H
4. EESC Opinion SOC/801, to be voted on at the October EESC plenary session, https://europa.eu/!P7yWwH

Rare Diseases – What’s next?

After the great success of the conference† organised by the EESC’s TEN Section in Bilbao in October 2023, the Section immediately achieved three further successes, proving the positive impact of its work: first, our rapporteur, Alain Coheur, was awarded the 2024 Black Pearl Policy Maker Award‡ by EURORDIS, the biggest EU-level civil society organisation network of rare disease patients. Bravo, Alain! Second, the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety asked the Section to co-organise a conference§, which we held at the EESC premises on 8 March.

2024. Third, some very important stakeholders joined our work on the issue of rare diseases: all EU Member States, which have launched the 3-year JARDIN Project‡, financed by the European Commission and aimed at integrating the European Reference Networks (ERNs) into the national health systems of each EU country, plus Norway and Ukraine.

It is very satisfying to see that our work has brought together around us a consolidated and growing number of stakeholders: civil society organisations, patients’ associations, medical practitioners, researchers, hospital managers, health ministries and EU institutions. We are working hard to keep their support and to convey their messages and expectations.

Prominent among those, and backed by Member States, medical practitioners, researchers and patients, is the call for an EU Action Plan on Rare Diseases to be included in the work programme of the next Commission.

The role of the EU Member States is crucial here, as health is a national competence. And the EESC has some excellent allies here, namely the current Presidency of the Council of the EU - the Spain-Belgium-Hungary trio¶, all three of which are fully supportive of our work.

So, after Spain (Bilbao) and Belgium (Brussels), the Section is ready for Hungary! And, indeed, the upcoming Hungarian Presidency has wasted no time: the EESC has just received a request to draw up an exploratory opinion on rare diseases, which, like the previous one¶, will be drafted by the EESC SOC Section§.
This opinion will allow the EESC to set out in more detail what this EU action plan should include. We are already working on a first draft. It will also enable us to hold a third conference in Budapest in November this year, under the patronage of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. Inviting our stakeholders and disseminating our joint proposals will be key to further progress. We are ready!

Bilbao, Brussels, Budapest … and, who knows, maybe Wroclaw under the Polish Presidency?

Al and health equity

SIF HOLST (DK)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group, EESC
President, Ad hoc Group on Equality, EESC
Vice-Chair, Disabled People’s Organisation Denmark

As a member of the Danish Health Technology Council, I have witnessed the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) when it comes to health technology. From identifying potential cancer with AI-supported screening to supporting mental health through AI-supported self-help apps, the possibilities are endless as this area is developed.

However, AI tools often come with a lack of diversity in training leads to subpar results when applying AI to identify skin cancer among individuals with darker skin tones. Another example would be a self-help app that can support your mental health and uses AI to continually adapt to your needs. So, if it is fed with data relating to well-educated, white, European men, it might not work as well if you are a woman from a different culture, scraping by as an unskilled labourer. A recent Danish study1 underlined this when it showed a 15% difference in an algorithm’s accuracy in diagnosing depression depending on gender, education, ethnicity and other factors. It is no longer only a matter of treating patients or preventing the emergence of diseases, but also of anticipating risks, personalising treatments, reducing risks, providing support during crises, aiming to ensure programmes are sustainable and properly managing human, financial and technical resources with careful consideration. The aim is no longer to give the hospital sector the means to carry out its tasks fully and over the long term.

Moreover, when developing such an app, you also need to consider how to cater to people with different needs, for example people with a visual or hearing impairment, people who are dyslexic or people with low digital literacy.

Civil society plays a vital role when it comes to developing AI solutions that support health equity. Strong engagement is needed to flag up the potential weaknesses of the chosen tools and suggest improvements. We need to insist on more diverse data collections and to shine a spotlight on potential bias in the existing datasets. We need to consider which algorithms should be used for AI models, how they should be tested and evaluated. We need an interdisciplinary approach, with data experts, healthcare equity experts and civil society as the voice of underrepresented groups. We, as civil society representatives, need to insist on more training in the cross section between AI and health equity. The possibilities are endless, but we must emphasise the need to secure the tools required to leave no one behind.

One Health: taking care systematically and sustainably

MARC DE PAOLI
Managing Director, Liège University Hospital
SYLVIANNE PORTUGAELS
Director-General, Citadelle Hospital

Committed to a transition that mobilises its stakeholders and impacts their activities, the hospital sector is a major player in the promotion and embodiment of the One Health approach.

Digitalisation of practices, increasing technological development, support for medical and managerial innovation are all elements that support a paradigm shift in the cure and care sectors.

It is no longer only a matter of treating patients or preventing the emergence of diseases, but also of anticipating risks, personalising treatments, reducing risks, providing support during crises, aiming to ensure programmes are sustainable and properly managing human, financial and technical resources with careful consideration. The aim is no longer to focus on performance in and of itself, but to give the hospital sector the means to carry out its tasks fully and over the long term.

It is also necessary to adapt our practices to the patients and their environment to really move from ‘taking responsibility’ to ‘taking care’, through a holistic and systemic approach that takes into account biological, psychological, social and ecological factors in the broad sense.
Andrija Štampar’s Legacy in Modern EU Health Policies

Decades ago, one of the most charismatic figures of 20th century public health, doctor Andrija Štampar from Croatia, understood the strong link between health, democracy, social development and personal happiness. He pledged to turn physicians into social workers and public teachers, financially independent of the patient and equally available to all social classes. He expanded preventive medicine versus curative.

In the spirit of Andrija Štampar, whose visionary ideas laid the groundwork for the World Health Organization (as founder of the WHO and the chairman of the WHO first assembly) and modern public health, we face contemporary health challenges in the EU with a renewed commitment to his ten foundational principles.

Andrija Štampar believed profoundly in proactive health measures, community involvement and the indispensable role of education in public health. As we represent civil society organisations (CSOs), it is essential to draw from his ethos to advocate for policies prioritising these aspects.

The EU is currently facing multiple health challenges, including increasing chronic diseases, disparities in health access and the recent strains of managing pandemic responses. These issues call for a holistic approach to healthcare, echoing Štampar’s advocacy for a system that serves all segments of society equitably.

The EU can honour his legacy by investing more in preventive measures, health education, wellness programmes and harm reduction strategies. These initiatives can reduce the burden of chronic diseases and address public health crises.

Štampar championed that community participation is essential for effective public health strategies. Today, this means involving civil society organisations in policy-making processes, ensuring their voices help shape proactive health measures, health education; and the right to education and information on the exercise of reproductive rights. Yet, they face restrictions on all these rights throughout Europe. Obstacles to the realisation of those rights are manifold. The stigma and discrimination that women with disabilities face in society play a huge role. Society and, especially health professionals, often question the right of women and girls with disabilities to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including their decision to become mothers.

Furthermore, existing common misconceptions affect the quality of advice offered to women with disabilities, for example by underestimating the existence of a sex life for these women and their ability to have children or by strongly recommending that they use contraceptives or even forcing them to do so.

Ensuring reproductive health for women with disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities should be equally able to exercise all their reproductive rights, including the right to decide freely whether or not to start a family and how many children to have; the right to the highest quality reproductive health care; and the right to education and information on the exercise of reproductive rights. Our hospitals are working on this by aiming for quality of care and wellbeing for everyone, in a sustainable manner.

In addition, research and education on new practices such as those developed in the academic hospital represent not only a pool of new skills but also a wellspring of hope for many professionals who are involved in one way or another in care work.

Our hospitals are working hard, with enthusiasm and clear-sightedness.

Many women with disabilities face barriers to accessing necessary reproductive healthcare services, such as a lack of accessible facilities and equipment, communication challenges, more frequent health neglect and dependence on carers.

There is a significant lack of appropriate, accessible and culturally sensitive resources about contraception, family planning, pregnancy, childbirth, sexually transmitted infections and support from healthcare providers, educators and social services to enable women and girls with disabilities to make informed decisions about their reproductive health.

In some cases, women with disabilities may have their reproductive choices restricted by legal guardians or authorities who do not respect their autonomy. Forced sterilisation and other interventions in the human body without consent of the person concerned have not yet been ended and are allowed in at least 13 EU Member States¹.

Addressing these barriers requires systemic changes in healthcare, legal and social systems to ensure that all women with disabilities have the opportunity to make informed choices about their reproductive health and to access the care they need. This may involve increasing accessibility, providing education and support, challenging stigma and discrimination and promoting autonomy and self-determination for women with disabilities, as well as ensuring training and capacity-building for health professionals on how to effectively support the reproductive health needs of these women.

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

20 Years in the European Union – A Success Story for Estonia

Kerli ATS (EE)
Member, Civil Society Organisations’ Group, EESC
Board member, Estonian Farmers’ Federation

On 1 May, Estonia celebrated 20 years in the European Union, along with Cyprus, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. For our small nation of 1.3 million people, which had liberated itself from over half a century of rule by a communist regime just 13 years prior to joining, accession was a significant step towards a more secure future. This move undoubtedly strengthened our democracy and assisted in our transformation into a European country.

Since joining the European Union, Estonia has incorporated European values such as solidarity, human rights and democracy into its national legal framework and has collaborated with Europe, which has helped achieve significant development across various sectors.

Coming from a rural area and representing farmers in the European Economic and Social Committee, I can confirm that the European Union has helped keep our rural areas viable. Over the past 20 years, the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has played a significant role in the development of Estonia’s agriculture and rural regions. The implementation of the CAP in Estonia has led to numerous changes, helping to modernise the agricultural sector, enhancing competitiveness and achieving social and environmental goals.

The CAP encourages diversification of farmers’ activities, including the processing and marketing of their products. With the support of the European Union, Estonian farmers are creating a food culture where regional and local foods are a true asset to the development of rural areas.

I can confidently say that joining the European Union has been a success story for Estonia. Thanks to this, Estonians today live in a modern environment, supported by a sustainable economic model and the benefits of the EU, which include freedom, free movement and a single market.

Estonians must maintain a strong European perspective to ensure the continuation of our success story. It is crucial that all citizens of the European Union ensure that their representation at EU level is impactful. This means actively participating in the European Parliament elections and voting for suitable candidates to represent our country.


REFLECTIONS

Empowering Youth Engagement: Scouts and the 2024 European Parliament elections

Martyna KOWACKA
Chief Commissioner, Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHP)

The upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections are extremely significant for Poland and for Europe. As scouts, we promote social engagement and active participation in public life. Within the Scout movement, young people learn to recognise and respond to the challenges their local communities are facing, and grow into local leaders who create real change in their environments. Civic education is part of the Scouts’ overarching goal to provide constant assistance to others. Here, young people are taught about the importance of voting and participating in the democratic process. We want to show young people that their votes cast into the ballot box directly affect our daily lives.

As the Chief Commissioner of the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association, I see that civic education created in collaboration with civil society organisations can bring numerous benefits, including greater citizen engagement in the electoral process and the promotion of democratic values.

I hope the European Parliament’s next term brings many positive changes for Europe and its citizens. Strong citizen participation in elections can build a better, more integrated and fairer Europe.

So why should we go and cast our vote? Because our voices have the power to bring about change. Through participation in elections, we can influence policy-making at the European level by electing representatives who will defend our interests and values. Actively participating in democratic decision-making is our right and our duty as citizens. In the Scout movement, we believe in educating by setting a personal example – this is why we encourage all voting-age members of our organisation to participate in elections and show the younger generation the power that one vote carries.
In 2027, the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association will host the 26th World Scout Jamboree in Gdańsk²; in the north of Poland. The world’s largest global outdoor youth event, it can gather up to 40 000 people from all over the world and is aimed at promoting peace and understanding. The Polish Scouts aim to engage the next generation of young leaders and plan to centre their programme around the theme ‘bravery’. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on relationships they have with their peers, their community, our planet and themselves. And what better way to show how we understand ‘bravery’ than to encourage everyone to participate in the upcoming 2024 elections for the European Parliament?

As a scouting community and as citizens of Europe, I hope to bring more understanding to the importance of our participation in the upcoming elections and to make informed decisions. Together, we can build a better future for all of us.

---

2. World Scout Jamboree is an international event organised every four years, bringing together tens of thousands of Scouts, aged 14 to 17, from around the globe, https://www.jamboree2027.org/

---

NEWS FROM THE GROUP

#EUelections2024: Civil society organisations discuss the EU they want and propose priorities for the new mandate

Addressing immediate and long-term challenges, properly implementing existing EU policies and strengthening EU values are some of the priorities proposed by civil society organisations (CSOs) for the new mandate, along with structured civil dialogue and a strong social agenda.

With a view to the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament¹ and the recent signing of the La Hulpe inter-institutional declaration on the European Pillar of Social Rights, national and European level CSO representatives discussed their political priorities at the conference¹ on Building Together the EU We Want. The event was organised by the Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee and took place on 16 April. Its conclusions and recommendations⁴ will feed into an EESC resolution with policy proposals for the new European Parliament and European Commission, to be adopted in July 2024.

In his speech, Ioannis Vardakastanis, rapporteur for the EESC resolution on the European elections¹ and President of the Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP), encouraged citizens to use their vote, joining forces for a sustainable, democratic, more inclusive and social EU that reflects our common values and addresses the EU’s immediate and long-term challenges. ‘Let’s vote for an EU that delivers and more effectively meets the rights, expectations and daily needs of all its citizens without exception. Let’s strengthen the EU to tackle effectively the global challenges that surround us,’ said Mr Vardakastanis.

Jannis Emmanouilidis from the European Policy Centre gave an inspiring keynote speech in which he addressed the socio-economic and political challenges facing the EU, the expectations of the European elections and the priorities for the next political cycle. ‘Geopolitical and geo-economic imperatives require the EU27 to increase the Union’s level of ambition. Muddling through will not suffice,’ he said. ‘There is no time to lose as the permacrisis that we have been experiencing for more than 15 years is here to stay.’ The new mandate would require clear prioritisation and trade-offs to ensure that the EU delivers on the most pressing policy issues. On the basis of probability and urgency, weak reaction capacity and systemic impact, Mr Emmanouilidis considered security and defence, climate change and geo-economic security to be the priorities for the new term. These priorities needed to go hand in hand with the preparations for EU enlargement and reform as well as strong implementation.

In two round tables, CSO representatives discussed what needs to be improved in the
EU. They also put forward specific ideas about what the Europe of tomorrow should look like. Participants stressed the need for political leadership and increasing the trust in the EU. EU policy in the next term should:

- be centred around youth, climate change and health, while recognising the impact of climate change on public health;
- champion a Europe united in solidarity, values and the pursuit of social justice, including as regards refugees and migrants and the Global South;
- tackle poverty and inequality, especially among children and young people, and promote inter-generational solidarity;
- ensure equal access to and affordability of healthcare and care;
- enhance engagement for democracy;
- address the challenges facing rural areas and generational renewal in agriculture.

Participants spoke about the need to:

- provide guidance and tools to engage all stakeholders in the green and digital transition, including financing and funding;
- act on words, preferably through legally binding acts, for instance regarding the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- create an EU central fiscal capacity that stimulates social investment in the Member States, ensuring that social protection systems are fit for the challenges ahead;
- ensure that legislative acts are effective and properly implemented;
- Revisit/implment policies that make the sustainable option the first choice for consumers.

Participants further suggested the nomination of a European Commission Vice-President for health, social rights and wellbeing and the implementation of a wellbeing economy, prioritising people and the planet. They called for an economy based on solidarity and not-for-profit and the redistribution of power and wealth in society that could help achieve a just transition.

Closing the conference, María Rodríguez Alcázar from the European Youth Forum said that ‘Young citizens’ deserve an EU that puts them and future generations at the centre. EU policy makers needed to tackle forms of inequality faced by young people and address the climate emergency for today’s youth and the generations to come. She congratulated the EESC on its leadership on youth issues and referred to the EU Youth Check proposed by the European Commission. ‘The EU Youth Check is an important step towards achieving this ambition. However, it cannot just be a labelling exercise. The Youth Check’ needs to be further elaborated, comprehensively implemented as a genuine cross-Commission process and truly embedded in the development of all legislation to make this vision a reality.’

The conclusions and recommendations of the conference can be found here: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/building-together-eu-we-want/conclusions-and-recommendations

**Day of the Liberal Professions 2024: a strong case for an EU Blue Deal**

On 7 May 2024, the EESC’s Liberal Professions Category¹ held its 8th Day of the Liberal Professions². This year’s theme was Professional support for the EU Blue Deal. The aim of the conference was to seek solutions to the growing challenges related to water.

Water is a vital but increasingly scarce resource.

As the global population grows, so does the demand for water. Almost two thirds of European citizens consider water quality and/or quantity in their country to be a serious problem. Climate change is set to further affect the availability, quality and quantity of water. Without action, water scarcity and poverty could concern ever larger parts of civil societies around the world, with far-reaching implications for food security, the environment, and human health, as well as economic, social, and political stability. The conference could therefore not have been more timely.

The event was opened by Klaus Thürriedl, President of the European Council of Chambers, who spoke about the contributions of the liberal professions to a water-smart society. Pietro Francesco De Lotto, President of the EESC’s Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCIM)³, focused on emerging blue engineering technologies that could help mitigate the risks of water scarcity. These keynote speeches were followed by three panel discussions, focusing on the added value from eight Member States and different liberal professions to the management of water threats across Europe, and can help in creating a water-fit framework for Europe.

The Day of the Liberal Professions 2024 brought together no fewer than 14 eminent speakers from eight Member States and different professions. Together, they made a strong case to put an EU Blue Deal⁴ in place and to mitigate the water-related challenges that Europe and the world will face in the years and decades to come.

Rudolf Kolbe, spokesperson of the EESC’s Liberal Professions Category, underlined in his closing remarks what the panel discussions had made clear: the various professions can play a pivotal role in the implementation of an EU Blue Deal by offering innovative solutions across sectors and working together.

Read as well the report from Unión Profesional, one of the organisations that participated in the event: Victoria Ortega, president of the Professional Union, participates in the eighth edition of the Liberal Professions Day organized by the EESC.

---

¹ EESC, Liberal Professions Category, https://europa.eu/!M976wG
² EESC, conference on 7 May 2024, https://europa.eu/!fF0kJ
³ EESC, Consultative Commission on Industrial Change, https://europa.eu/!f646bN
⁴ EU Blue Deal, https://europa.eu/!6dwWwF
The European Economic and Social Committee and the European Parliament signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** on cooperation in preparation for the European elections, scheduled for 6-9 June 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.


---

**The future of the Sustainable Development Goals after the EU elections – why vote?**

**Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ**

*Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group, EESC*

*Director, Croatian civil society organisation “Sustainable Community Development” (ODRAZ)*

It is high time that the youth of Europe became more involved in society and democratic processes. Therefore, Croatian Member of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group **Lidija Pavić-Rogošić** decided to inform young people of the importance of voting for the European Parliament. In April and May she organised several interactive lectures for students of Virovitica University of Applied Sciences, Baltazar Zaprešić Polytechnic, Tituš Brezovacki Grammar School in Zagreb and Mate Balota High School in Poreč.

Some 150 students from different parts of Croatia were informed about the EU’s bodies and their roles in policymaking, with an emphasis on the European Parliament and the work of the European Economic and Social Committee, but also on important EU policies related to sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals, from the **European Green Deal** to the **European Pillar of Social Rights**.

What the EU is doing for people, specifically young people, and why they should vote...
Youth should also listen more to the needs of young people and involve them more in decision-making. Youth should also receive feedback on whether and how their voices are respected.

Some of the topics that concern students are:

- security, given the current war in Ukraine;
- energy independence, with an emphasis on renewable energy;
- housing and employment;
- exchanges in various areas, including culture;
- waste management;
- climate change;
- overtourism;
- accessible and affordable public transport.

The students believed that creating entrepreneurial centres, competence centres or innovation hubs would make it easier for them to enter the labour market, as they would have the opportunity to gain practical experience and prepare for the current digital and green transitions.

Ms Pavić-Rogošić was satisfied with the students’ involvement. ‘Such educational, interactive events are certainly an incentive for youth to vote and thus influence the future (sustainable) development of the EU,’ she said. ‘Use your vote!’ was her final message.

The European Union is worth more than our national disputes

Dominique GILLOT
Member, Civil Society Organisations’ Group, EESC
General Federation of Children in Care in Public Education (FG PEP)
National Consultative Council of People with Disabilities (CNCPH)

‘Promoting Europe, defending democracy!’ These are the issues at stake in the upcoming European elections on 6-9 June.

Our Group (the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group) works tirelessly to convey the expectations of civil society, which is off the radar of the institutions, in order to give a voice to those who are invisible and to promote and harmonise fundamental rights in the European Union for a sustainable future.

The voting date for the European elections (6-9 June 2024) should not be missed; otherwise we risk losing voters to bias and national divisions, factors which can also weaken desires for union. These elections are crucial for European integration, the defence of fundamental rights and equal access to such rights in the EU-27.

There is no doubt about the seriousness of the situation Europe is in right now; electing Members of the European Parliament is vital for fair representation, the direct universal suffrage of states and for the European continent to assert itself as a global power.

The term of office that is coming to a close for a Europe of solidarity and defence.

With this experience behind us and, convinced of the need to involve European citizens, the Members of our Group urge each and every one of you to vote in order to help strengthen the European Union, reducing the risk of backsliding that is encouraged by extremist and misleading arguments spreading at a dangerous rate.

Let’s promote social progress; Fight against discrimination; Protect PEACE....

This is the message of the EESC French delegation (three Members, including myself, representing each of the three EESC Groups) delivered on European Day, 9 May, at the event held in front of the Paris City Hall (Parvis de l’Hôtel de Ville) in order to raise our fellow citizens’ awareness on the importance of the European elections. Fruitful contacts were made with the visitors concerned.

Nobody should give up their rights as a citizen. Using your vote is crucial!


HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST EESC PLENARY SESSION

EESC discusses factors for EU long-term competitiveness

On the first day of the April plenary, EESC Members debated the Commission report on EU competitiveness with Maïve Rute, Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) at the European Commission, and adopted opinion INT/1028 on a Long-term competitiveness strategy.

Oliver Röpke, EESC President, emphasised that ‘competitiveness is a cornerstone of the European Union’s economic success, driving growth, innovation and prosperity while enhancing its global influence and resilience’. He added that: ‘When we discuss European competitiveness, we must put people at the centre of the debate and ensure that we leave no one behind. Its ultimate impact and significance lie in how it affects the well-being, opportunities and prosperity of individuals and communities. Therefore, any debate on competitiveness must prioritise the needs, rights and aspirations of people.’
Ms Rute stressed the need to focus on making investments available to industry in the EU to enable it to scale up, and to its research and innovation activities, where the EU lagged behind the US, China and Japan. In light of the unravelling of the rules-based order, she highlighted the importance of ensuring that the EU had a real level playing field with its international competitors.

Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group contributed to the debate. Giuseppe Guerini, co-spokesperson for the EESC’s Social Economy Category, stressed that real competitiveness stemmed from strong social cohesion. Without solidarity and social infrastructure, Europe would lack real competitiveness because people were the first factor in competitiveness. Investment in education, training and welfare would be as strategic as that in technology and material infrastructure.

Corina Murafa said that: ‘Reaching carbon neutrality by 2050 is the only pathway that can ensure our long-term competitiveness. For that, we need investments of EUR 1 000 billion per year, but we don’t have this because we are inefficient.’ She argued that it was crucial to reduce inefficiencies and better integrate markets.

Juraj Sipko reflected on the EU gradually losing its position on the world market over the last two decades and asked ‘what will we do to improve our competitiveness?’

Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia said that, from the perspective of green and digital consumers, competitiveness was based on the ability to be a leader in adopting sustainable practices and advanced digital technologies that met consumers’ needs and expectations while promoting the Sustainable Development Goals. Proper labelling and better information on products could foster responsible consumerism.

Arnaud Schwartz reminded Members that humans were only one species among others and that at least 50% of the economy directly depended on nature. Thus, protecting biodiversity was a necessity, which led him to ask ‘where does the EU take this into account when trying to improve its competitiveness?’

Reacting to Ms Rute’s presentation, Louise Grabo noted that companies were moving beyond the Atlantic because Europe lacked investment and capital. Therefore, she concluded that the EU’s competitiveness needed to be a priority for the next European Commission.

In April, the plenary of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on the proposed Defence of Democracy Package, with contributions from Ana Gallego Torres, Director-General of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), and Ken Godfrey, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy. The debate was linked to the presentation and adoption of opinion SOC/773 on the Defence of Democracy package.

In his opening remarks, Oliver Röpke underlined that ‘when talking about “dangers” for our democracies, it is important to underline the strong response of the European Union and the track record of the current European Commission in the defence of democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. The EESC has also heard the concerns expressed by many civil society actors on what they see as the risks of the package. We need to find a common approach to combine the defence of democracy and all necessary safeguards to preserve civic space.’

Ms Gallego Torres, presenting the content of the Defence of Democracy Package from the Commission’s perspective, highlighted the consensus on the goal of fighting for the EU’s democratic model. She acknowledged the criticism of the package, but stressed that ‘we cannot be naive when it comes to foreign manipulation’. In contrast, Mr Godfrey warned against the potential pitfalls of the proposed directive and pointed out that it could stigmatise civil society organisations (CSOs), while not meeting its objectives. He stressed that all malignant political interferences should be scrutinised rather than solely foreign interferences in democracy.

Christian Moos, EESC rapporteur for the opinion on the Defence of Democracy package, said that ‘we consider this directive to be dangerous. It resembles a “foreign agents” law. It would potentially stigmatise NGOs. Clearly, the current proposal should be withdrawn. It risks adding to the problem of shrinking civic spaces in Europe, and that is something the Commission couldn’t possibly want.’

The President of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group, Séamus Boland, raised the following points, keeping in mind the upcoming European elections:

- democracy could not be taken for granted;
- CSOs played a crucial role in protecting and nurturing democracy;
- more efforts must be taken to protect CSOs and involve them in policymaking through a structured and meaningful civil dialogue.

Decisively, he asked everyone to use their vote to make sure the EU stuck to democratic principles in the future.

Several Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group spoke in the debate. Ionuț Sibian warned that this tool intended to defend democracy could become a tool to stigmatise civil society democracy watchdogs, notably in the Western Balkans.

Regarding the package under debate, Andris Gobiniš stated that it was ‘a good
day for democracy’ because, among other reasons, the EESC had produced an ‘opinion that is extremely critical of the Commission’s proposal’. He said that democracy must be defended but not like this.

Vice-President Pietro Barbieri argued that a strong democracy needed to be part of society and that civil dialogue was a crucial aspect of this. To combat populism and external attacks, dialogue was key. He concluded by declaring that ‘Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union is freedom and participation, and this is why we are here today’.

On 25 April, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a high-level debate on the conclusions of the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW68), held in New York in March, which focused on women’s poverty.

The EESC was present at this session for the first time as part of the EU delegation and as the voice of European civil society. The EESC contributed to UNCSW68 with a declaration on A gender lens on poverty, comprising 10 action points for the economic empowerment and social protection of women.

Commitment and dedication on the part of both EU institutions and civil society is crucial for the continued empowerment of women and girls. Coordinated action is needed to keep pushing for the implementation of the CSW recommendations, as well as for important EU legislation, said guest speaker Lanfranco Fanti, member of the cabinet of the Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, in the plenary debate.

Concerted action at all levels achieved a number of milestones during this Commission’s term of office, such as the EU Pay Transparency Directive and the European Care Strategy.

With the European elections and a new European Commission coming up quickly, continued institutional support will be paramount. Some of the EU’s top organisations championing gender equality took part in the EESC plenary session debate, and called for an EU Council formation on gender equality, an EU coordinator on violence against women and a renewed mandate for the Commissioner on Equality.

Florence Raes, director of UN Women Brussels, said that despite real progress on equality, women’s rights were being undermined to an unprecedented extent. It was imperative to emphasise gender equality as there was a growing danger that it could be knocked off the list of priorities.

According to UN figures, 10% of women live in extreme poverty and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be achieved unless we pick up the pace on eradicating poverty, which constitutes the overarching priority of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group for 2024.

‘Never forget that poverty is also related to multiple forms of discrimination. Being a woman and a member of a minority group means that you will struggle. We have to remember that equality is not enough anymore: equality needs intersectionality’, said Ilaria Todde, advocacy director of the Eurocentralasian Lesbian Community.

‘Tackling the root causes of women’s poverty globally is crucial for women’s full and effective participation in all areas of life’, said Mary Collins, director of the European Women’s Lobby. ‘Violence against women is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems throughout the world. Today we applaud the adoption of the first ever EU Directive on violence against women and domestic violence’.

Several Members of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group (Group III) contributed to the debate.

Vice-President Sif Holst, who was part of the EESC’s delegation in New York, in her capacity as EESC President of the Ad Hoc Group on Equality, stressed that civil society is a vital part of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of some of the most vulnerable groups, such as girls and women with disabilities.

Lidia Pavić-Rogošić highlighted that the success in sustainable strengthening of gender equality relies on fostering a lifelong culture of gender equality. This requires recognition, acceptance of responsibility and permanent commitment of all stakeholders in society. Gender-aware public policies and the adoption of a gender-sensitive budget are important tools for achieving gender equality and integrating those principles into all policies of the EU.

Juliane Marie Neiendam questioned how feasible it was to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 when there are so many problems to deal with related to gender equality. Although in Europe women account for 50% of all judges and hold 32% of seats in national parliaments, in Afghanistan, before the Taliban regime took over in August 2021, women made up 27% of the Members of Parliament, 21% of lawyers and there were 265 female judges. Now there’s not a single woman left. Eliminating poverty might improve the problem of child marriage (7 million girls under the age of 15 are forced to get married every year), Ms Neiendam said, but asked what about female genital mutilation, which is still a practice in 30 countries around the world?
On the second day of its April plenary, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on Migration and skilled labour shortages, linked to the adoption of its opinion on the Talent Mobility Package. This initiative comprises a series of new measures designed to make the Union more attractive to talent from outside the EU and to facilitate mobility within it.

Guest speaker Commissioner Ylva Johansson, responsible for Home Affairs, called on the EESC to support a team Europe approach to labour migration, with a broader European dimension. ‘Labour migration is mainly a national competence and it will continue to be so, with one Member State after another increasing quotas for labour migration. But we need to create a team Europe approach, with EU institutions, Member States and civil society organisations working together to bring new initiatives and facilitate the implementation of labour mobility policies.’

One of the basic measures in the Talent Mobility Package is the ‘Talent Pool’ initiative, which aims to provide a comprehensive policy framework to address labour and skills shortages across Europe, which have caused serious obstacles for the operational levels of European companies. The EU Talent Pool would constitute the first EU-level voluntary matching pool, where interested Member States could bring together employers in the EU and jobseekers in third countries.

In its opinion on the Talent Mobility Package, the EESC stresses that the Talent Pool needs to be a practical, easy-to-use and trusted tool that is attractive for workers and employers. At the same time, it has to support fair and ethical legal labour migration.

EU, including higher risk of poverty, social isolation, lack of access to services, inadequate healthcare and lower participation in society. In some cases, they face gross violations of their rights, such as violence and forced contraception, sterilisation and abortion. Their reproductive rights are not realised on an equal basis, amongst other things, due to stigma and discrimination.

The next UNCSW session will take place in New York in March 2025 and focus on reviewing and appraising the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. 30 years after it was adopted, the Beijing Declaration is still considered the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women’s rights.

---

1. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the world’s top international forum for assessing progress on achieving gender equality. At its 68th session in March 2024, it focused on women’s poverty, https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women.
2. EESC declaration: A gender lens on poverty, https://europa.eu/!Brgb6M.

Commissioner Ylva Johansson calls for the European Economic and Social Committee’s support for a team Europe approach to labour migration

On the second day of its April plenary, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on Migration and skilled labour shortages, linked to the adoption of its opinion on the Talent Mobility Package. This initiative comprises a series of new measures designed to make the Union more attractive to talent from outside the EU and to facilitate mobility within it.

Guest speaker Commissioner Ylva Johansson, responsible for Home Affairs, called on the EESC to support a team Europe approach to labour migration, with a broader European dimension. ‘Labour migration is mainly a national competence and it will continue to be so, with one Member State after another increasing quotas for labour migration. But we need to create a team Europe approach, with EU institutions, Member States and civil society organisations working together to bring new initiatives and facilitate the implementation of labour mobility policies.’

One of the basic measures in the Talent Mobility Package is the ‘Talent Pool’ initiative, which aims to provide a comprehensive policy framework to address labour and skills shortages across Europe, which have caused serious obstacles for the operational levels of European companies. The EU Talent Pool would constitute the first EU-level voluntary matching pool, where interested Member States could bring together employers in the EU and jobseekers in third countries.

In its opinion on the Talent Mobility Package, the EESC stresses that the Talent Pool needs to be a practical, easy-to-use and trusted tool that is attractive for workers and employers. At the same time, it has to support fair and ethical legal labour migration.

EU, including higher risk of poverty, social isolation, lack of access to services, inadequate healthcare and lower participation in society. In some cases, they face gross violations of their rights, such as violence and forced contraception, sterilisation and abortion. Their reproductive rights are not realised on an equal basis, amongst other things, due to stigma and discrimination.

The next UNCSW session will take place in New York in March 2025 and focus on reviewing and appraising the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. 30 years after it was adopted, the Beijing Declaration is still considered the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women’s rights.

---

1. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the world’s top international forum for assessing progress on achieving gender equality. At its 68th session in March 2024, it focused on women’s poverty, https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women.
2. EESC declaration: A gender lens on poverty, https://europa.eu/!Brgb6M.
OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 24 and 25 April 2024. The EESC plenary adopted 17 opinions of which 11 were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Alain COHEUR (BE), rapporteur, CCMI/220 Towards a more resilient, competitive and sustainable Europe

Athanasios IOANNIDIS (EL), rapporteur, ECO/637 Facilitating cross-border solutions

Christian MOOS (DE), rapporteur, SOC/773 Defence of democracy package

Christian MOOS (DE), rapporteur, SOC/784 Roadmap on anti-drug trafficking

Cillian LOHAN (IE), rapporteur, REX/580 EU-UK youth engagement

Ionuț SIBIAN (RO), rapporteur, REX/581 New growth plan and Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans

John COMER (IE), rapporteur, TEN/830 Safeguarding Democracy Against Disinformation (own-initiative opinion)

Krzysztof BALON (PL), SOC/754 Evaluation of European Social Fund 2014-2020 (evaluation report)

Luca Jahier (IT), rapporteur, ECO/631 Reform and investment proposals in the Member States (2023-2024 European Semester cycle) (own-initiative opinion)

Marc DECOSTER (BE), rapporteur, NAT/914 Towards a greater involvement of Member States, Regions and Civil Society actors in the implementation of the Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas (own-initiative opinion)

Stoyan TCHOUKANOV (BG), rapporteur-general, NAT/932 Amendment to CAP basic acts - simplification

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website.

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 11 and 12 July 2024. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

A list including all new work appointments of Civil Society Organisations’ Group Members is available on the Committee’s website.

UPCOMING EVENTS

04/06/2024 – Conference on ‘The State of Health in the EU’; https://europa.eu/IT9YN73

17/06/2024 – Meeting of the Social Economy Category

01/07/2024 – Meeting of the Farmers’ Category

02/07/2024 – Meeting of the Associational Life Category

02/07/2024 – Meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category