



REX Work Programme

(Activities for 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2026)

1. MAIN OBJECTIVES AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES

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

In accordance Article 3.5 of the Treaty of European Union, the REX Section will try to ensure that: "In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens. It shall contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter."

The REX section aims to promote a favourable framework for the activities of civil society organisations, to establish and improve direct contact with civil society organisations in third countries, and to support and strengthen civil and social dialogue in non-EU countries and regions in order to promote democracy, human rights (included social and labour rights) and the fundamental principles of the rule of law. This work is increasingly framed by the many international political and economic agreements that the EU has concluded with third countries.

The REX Section cooperates efficiently in its work with the other European institutions – the Directorates General of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European External Action Service and various European agencies in order to ensure that the European Union sends a united message to the rest of the world and that shared economic interests are balanced with an honest consideration of values such as democracy, fundamental rights, rule of law, sustainable development and public participation. The REX section pays attention to the **priorities established by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council** in order to ensure that organised civil society can take consistent and supportive action. The REX section also aims to draw the attention of the other EU institutions to issues identified by civil society in the EU Member States and in partner countries as priorities for external policies.

The work of the section has changed significantly in recent years and the section is currently operating in an extremely complex geopolitical environment. Russia's unjustified and unprovoked invasion of

Ukraine has created a need to provide stronger support to Ukrainian civil society, to strengthen links with civil society in the EU's neighbourhood, to step up the focus on enlargement and to add initiatives relating to defence and civil society preparedness to the section's programme of activities in order to help tackle disinformation and hybrid threats.

Furthermore, the conflicts in the Middle East and growing number of conflicts in Africa and substantive reduction in development aid, pose a number of challenges for civil society, which needs to operate in an challenging environment and with scarce resources. Further to ongoing wars and conflicts, the succession of various crises, from the global economic crisis to the COVID19 pandemic, has significantly impacted the achievement of Sustainable development goals (SDGs). The impact of this inability to deliver will have significant consequences for the global economy, social welfare, and the environment and will intensify even further the race for resources such as water, critical raw materials and provoke global international tensions.

In times of increasing geopolitical divides and continuous challenges to the core principles of multilateralism and the rules-based international order, the REX section aims to strengthen civil society outreach in partner countries in order to promote high environmental, social and human rights standards and to reach a common understanding on the challenges the world is facing today – poverty, climate change, growing violence in many regions, the intensification of autocratic and authoritarian governance structures and shrinking civic space with adoption of restrictive legislation on right of association and access to information, growing conflict- and climate-related migration, and the increasing scarcity of natural resources such as water and critical raw materials. This work focuses on developing countries, especially those in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific, whose progress is often hindered by political instability, economic challenges such as high debt and poor governance, and pressures from foreign interests.

This work programme focuses on 2026 and aims to illustrate the type and number of activities that the REX section will organise. In geographical and thematic terms, the REX section will prioritise issues relating to:

- 1) **EU enlargement and neighbourhood;**
- 2) **relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood, with a particular focus on developing countries and strategic partners;**
- 3) **international trade and its synergies with EU policies such as economic security and the competitiveness agenda; and**
- 4) **soft diplomacy and horizontal activities, with a view to promoting universal human rights (with particular reference to peace, democracy, social, gender and children rights, labour rights and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment). Additional activities will also focus on the fight against poverty, migration, blue diplomacy and climate diplomacy, and civil society's capacity to react to hybrid threats, when necessary in cooperation with the other EESC's Sections and structures.**

Through its activities, the section will continue to channel the ideas and innovative potential of **civil society** into meaningful and effective opinions that can make a valuable contribution to the European decision-making process.

Each of these activities will be carried out in line with priorities of the EESC's Presidency **and take into account impact that the EESC can have**. Many of the activities relate to the REX section's existing **31 sub-structures** and will be designed and implemented by these bodies with the political support of the REX Bureau.

The number of activities that the REX section is already undertaking, coupled with the large number of existing REX structures, puts huge pressure on the human and financial resources available. The REX section therefore needs to focus on priority activities. Setting up new activities that are not included in the current work programme will have to involve analysing the constraints on the section's financial and human resources and considering the possibility of disengaging from other activities considered to be of low priority.

2. EXPECTED NEW WORK IN PRIORITY AREAS

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

2.1. EU neighbourhood

2.1.1 Enlargement, candidate countries and potential candidate countries

On 4 November 2025, the European Commission adopted the 2025 Enlargement Package, providing a detailed assessment of the state of play and the progress made by **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine** on their respective paths towards accession to the European Union.

Each of these countries is at a different stage in its path towards joining the European Union, but the process of accession should be closely monitored by civil society, to ensure that the views of civil society on the reform agenda are heard and to avoid democratic backsliding.

The EESC will make sure that the social partners and civil society organisations play an active role in implementing the reform agendas linked to the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans Growth Plan, the Moldova Growth Plan and the Ukraine Reform Plan. The EESC is also monitoring the situation in **Georgia** and the democratic backsliding in the country and will continue communicating with civil society in Georgia and supporting its European aspirations.

The Commission's 2025 annual report confirmed that **Türkiye** continues to be a key partner of the European Union. Nonetheless, accession negotiations with the country have been at a standstill since 2018, in line with the decision of the Council. Serious concerns remain in the areas of fundamental rights and the rule of law, including with respect to the independence of the judiciary.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

The EESC will continue engaging with the candidate countries and potential candidate countries through the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform and the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform (provided the political situation in Georgia becomes favourable). We will launch the EU-North Macedonia Joint Consultative Committee and initiate an EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina Joint Consultative Committee, provided that the 'Fundamentals' cluster/initial negotiation chapters are opened with these countries.

Should accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova be initiated in the upcoming months, the EESC will be given a mandate to set up joint consultative committees with these two partners.

The REX section should also reflect on how to monitor developments in Russia, Central Asia and Azerbaijan following the dissolution by the Bureau of the Eastern Neighbourhood Follow-up Committee and the Russia and Central Asia Follow-up Committee.

Together with the **Ad-hoc Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law**, the REX section will continue to coordinate visits to selected EU candidate countries in 2026.

The section could consider holding seminars in the EU Member States on the benefits of the enlargement, in cooperation with DG ENEST. These seminars could be organised together with national economic and social councils or civil society organisations on the ground and should showcase positive outcomes of enlargement and discuss the challenges. Enlargement candidate members could be invited to participate in the seminars.

Possible cooperation with other sections and units in the EESC could also be envisaged, such as cooperation with the TEN and NAT sections on reconstruction in Ukraine or cooperation with the unit responsible for cooperation with national economic and social councils in providing technical assistance to those candidate countries who have expressed interest to set up such institutions.

The Section will continue to steer the implementation of the project "*Enlargement Candidate Members*" which allows civil society organisations from the candidate and potential candidate countries to participate in the elaboration of the EESC's opinions and will assist the organisation of an Enlargement Forum to assess the challenges and opportunities of enlargement from civil society perspective.

2.1.2 Other priority countries and regions

EU NEIGHBOURHOOD

- The UK**

The EESC deals with EU-UK relations mainly via its EU-UK Follow-Up Committee and the EU Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) for the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which foster relations with UK civil society and monitor key developments on both sides of the Channel that

are important for EU-UK relations. In 2026, the REX section could work on economic security in the EU-UK partnership.

In both Brussels and London, there is considerable momentum for recalibrating and rebooting the bilateral relationship and cooperating on security and economic issues. The voice of organised civil society urgently needs to become part of this debate. In that context, both the EU DAG and the EU-UK Follow-up Committee will work on being more actively involved in the preparations for the 2026 EU-UK summit, as a follow-up to the first such summit held in May 2025 in London to initiate a reset of the EU-UK relationship. In that spirit, the EESC will continue to participate in the EU-UK Parliamentary Assembly (PPA) and contribute to the recommendation the PPA will elaborate in view of the EU-UK summit. Besides, the REX section will continue to cooperate with the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and engage in the meetings of the CoR-UK contact group. Last but not least, with a view to further deepening the bilateral cooperation, the REX section will continue to participate and contribute, in full cooperation with the EU Delegation in London, in the Youth Dialogue and in the EU Citizens' Gathering. Likewise, it will continue to engage with civil society in the devolved nations, as it was the case with the 2025 All-Island Stakeholders Forum.

- **The EEA and the Arctic region**

The Agreement on the European Economic Area brings the 27 EU Member States and the three EEA EFTA states – Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway – together in a single market. The key policy areas covered by the EEA agreement are the free movement of goods, services, capital and people. The full realisation of the single market is therefore a core priority of the EEA.

The EEA Consultative Committee will plan its 2026 agenda and work at a meeting in Copenhagen in December 2025. The Commission's 2026 Work Programme features a new initiative entitled 'The Defence Single Market: EU technological base fit for future', which aligns with an upcoming EEA Consultative Committee resolution and report on 'The European Single Market for Preparedness and Defence'. This topic may be discussed further at the EEA Consultative Committee's meeting in Brussels next spring. Additionally, forthcoming legislative proposals on the Energy Union and climate could prompt new resolutions and reports by the Committee.

The section will continue its follow-up on opinion REX/592 on *Developing Europe's strategy for the Arctic in dialogue with civil society*, adopted in January 2025.

- **Armenia**

In 2026, the section will continue to strengthen EU-Armenia civil society relations through its coordination of the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform, the body established under EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to ensure structured dialogue and civil-society oversight of the Agreement's implementation. The section will focus on enhancing the quality and impact of the Platform's joint recommendations, deepening engagement with Armenian partners on rule of law, social and economic reforms, green and digital transitions, and the evolving regional security context. By promoting inclusive participation, evidence-based dialogue and closer links with CEPA's institutional bodies, the section will contribute to more effective reform monitoring and a stronger, more resilient EU-Armenia partnership.

- **Belarus**

The authoritarian regime in Belarus and the fact that the country has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative have made cooperation with civil society in the country almost impossible. Nevertheless, the EESC will continue to engage with independent Belarusian civil society and media workers in exile, following previous initiatives on disinformation and support for independent media. The memorandum of understanding signed between the EESC and Belarusian democratic forces in June 2025 will serve as a basis for implementing joint initiatives with Belarusian partners and for raising awareness about the situation in the country.

- **EUROMED**

The EU's southern neighbourhood is heavily affected by multiple crises, from armed conflicts to the climate and migration crises. In addition, 2026 will most likely continue to be marked by the dire humanitarian situations in Gaza and Syria and the immense challenges linked to reconstruction. In parallel, Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon and the confrontation between Israel and Houthi rebels in Yemen may still be ongoing. As a representative of organised civil society, the EESC will continue expressing its strong solidarity with its counterparts in the region, with full support for their commitment to peaceful, sustainable and democratic development, based on shared values such as human rights.

In 2026, the EESC will concentrate on the implementation of the Pact for the Mediterranean and will prepare an exploratory opinion, requested by the Cyprus Presidency, on *The Role of the Private Sector and Civil Society in Strengthening Economic Cooperation within the Pact for the Mediterranean*. This opinion will also constitute an important topic for the 2026 Euromed summit. Other priorities will include combating pollution in the Mediterranean Sea and strengthening dialogue among the various civil society actors in the region. Moreover, we will strengthen the cooperation with the Union of Arab Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (UAESCSI) and the Union of the Mediterranean. We will continue to work closely together with the social partner organisations of the region: BUSSINESSMED and ATUC (Arabic Trade Union Organisation) and with the Anna Lindh Foundation.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

In connection with candidate countries and potential candidate countries:

- Implementation of the Enlargement Candidate Members' project;
- Inaugural meeting of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Consultative Committee (*tbc*);
- Inaugural meeting of the EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina Joint Consultative Committee (*tbc*);
- 3rd meeting of the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee, in Albania;
- 4th meeting of the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee, in Brussels;
- 22nd meeting of the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, in Montenegro;
- 23rd meeting of the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, in the EU;
- 21st meeting of the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, in the EU;
- 22nd meeting of the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, in Serbia;

- EU-Western Balkans High-Level Civil Society Conference, in one of the EU Member States;
- Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee fact-finding mission to North Macedonia, back-to-back with the country visit of the Group of Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law;
- 63rd and 64th meeting of the Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee (internal), in Brussels;
- 19th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Ukraine or Brussels;
- 20th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Brussels;
- 17th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform in Chișinău;
- 18th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, in Brussels;
- 15th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Tbilisi;
- 16th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Brussels;
- two meetings of the Eastern European Domestic Advisory Group;
- EU-Ukraine Civil Society Forum;
- EU-Georgia Civil Society Forum;
- EU-Moldova Civil Society Forum;
- 44th meeting of the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee in Türkiye + preparatory meeting in Brussels;
- Seminars on enlargement in the EU Member States (*tbc*).

The UK:

- three to four meetings of the EESC's UK Follow-Up Committee;
- work on *Economic Security in the EU-UK Partnership* (*tbc*);
- regular contact with civil society organisations in the devolved nations of the UK.

Euromed:

- Euromed summit 2026;
- exploratory opinion on *The Role of the Private Sector and Civil Society in Strengthening Economic Cooperation within the Pact for the Mediterranean*;
- own-initiative opinion (*topic tbc*);
- two Euromed Follow-Up Committee meetings, including one joint meeting with the Moroccan Economic, Social and Environmental Council;
- exploratory mission to a Euromed country;
- participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean;
- participation in the Mediterranean Dialogues;
- co-organisation of and participation in the Brussels Civil Society Forum (MAJALAT).

EEA + the EU's Arctic policy:

- 37th meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee in Liechtenstein in May 2026 (*tbc*);
- 38th meeting of the EEA Consultative Committee in Brussels in November 2026 (*tbc*);

- follow-up to opinion REX/592 on *Developing Europe's strategy for the Arctic in dialogue with civil society* (adopted in January 2025).

Armenia:

- 8th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Yerevan;
- 9th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Brussels.

2.2. Relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood

2.2.1 ACP and Africa

The Samoa Agreement was signed in November 2023 and entered into force provisionally in January 2024. Article 95 of the agreement clearly provides for the establishment of a stakeholder engagement mechanism through which civil society would be closely consulted as part of the implementation of the agreement. However, to date, no real progress has been made in setting up such a consultation mechanism. The Section will work towards the establishment of civil society mechanism under the Samoa Agreement and in the framework of the EU-Africa Partnership and will insist for meaningful civil society involvement.

Despite the lack of progress on related civil society mechanisms, the EESC's ACP Follow-Up Committee intends to pursue the activities launched in recent years and will **increasingly focus on cooperation with the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (AU ECOSOCC)**, in the context of the memorandum of understanding signed in July 2024 in Accra, Ghana.

The REX section should reflect on how to optimise its ACP activities and make them more impactful. For instance, events with civil society representatives from the ACP countries could be envisaged in order to prepare proposals for reforming international institutions and ways to deal with the global challenges of our time. The themes of the discussions/events should be centred around the following topics:

- monitoring and evaluating the impact of Global Gateway projects in Africa;
- the importance of SME's internationalisation and their ability to participate in development projects;
- global governance reform of international institutions (UN, WTO, IMF, World Bank);
- how to share resources, including critical raw materials and strategic resources such as water;
- demographics and movement of people, including regular and climate migration;
- protecting the environment and tackling climate change.

In this respect, the REX can reflect on how the external part of the upcoming Multilateral Financial Framework "Global Europe" can become the main EU tool to rebuild multilateralism.

The Section will continue working on the objectives and implementation of the **Global Gateway and on its strategic evaluation foreseen for 2026**. The existing Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities Advisory Board for the Global Gateway has remained largely ineffective and disconnected from decision-making, while business representatives are consulted separately through another advisory group, thereby fragmenting dialogue and preventing a genuinely inclusive and coordinated approach. The Section will work with the Commission to review and strengthen these mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation linked to policy-shaping and monitoring processes. The EESC and the CoR

should also be granted an active role in this mechanism and not be mere observers. The Section can consider elaborating an own initiative opinion on the evaluation of the Global Gateway and a dedicated study.

In 2025, the first domestic advisory group with an African country started operating under the EU-Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). The objective is to assist Kenyan civil society in effectively and inclusively running its domestic advisory group in 2026 (capable of guaranteeing full representation of civil society and the social partners) and to hold the first joint meeting. It is also important to reflect in this context on the other EPAs, which do not have a dedicated civil society mechanism, as well as on the impact of other trade and investment arrangements such as the Sustainable Investment Partnerships and Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships. The impact of Global Gateway projects and programming on the sustainable development of the ACP regions should also be assessed.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- further cooperation with the European Commission and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) on the implementation of Article 95 of the Samoa Agreement;
- participation in meetings of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) (including regional assemblies, where relevant, in particular the EU-Africa Assembly) and strengthening cooperation with the JPA, in particular as regards civil society events in the margins of the JPA;
- implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with the AU ECOSOCC and update of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Union of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions of Africa (UCESA);
- continued efforts to ensure that civil society is involved in implementing economic partnership agreements (EPAs);
- support for the implementation of the EU-Kenya EPA through efficient operation of the domestic advisory group;
- organisation of a CARIFORUM-EU Consultative Committee meetings.

Regarding the implementation of the MoU with the African Union ECOSOCC, the following activities will be considered:

- further work on the civil society engagement mechanism for the EU-Africa Partnership, based on the joint proposal put forward by the EESC and the AU ECOSOCC;
- collaboration in the context of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly and the Africa-EU Regional Assembly;
- exchange of information and cooperation on the drafting of opinions on issues of common interest to the EESC and the ECOSOCC, in particular given the fact that the African Union theme of the year 2026 will be “Assuring sustainable water availability and safe sanitation systems in order to achieve the goals of the AU Agenda 2063”.

Topics on which cooperation could also be envisaged include migration and mobility and their root causes such as resource scarcity, financing for development, sustainable development and democracy, climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, women’s empowerment and employment, civil society empowerment, and the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of Global Gateway projects in Africa.

2.2.2 Latin America (LA)

The year 2026 presents a strategic opportunity to not only **sustain the EESC's active presence in various EU-LA bilateral and regional fora, but also to enhance visibility** in response to an evolving global context and the emergence of new or modernised legal frameworks. Over recent years, the REX section's engagement with partners has intensified significantly. The 2024-2025 period marked a clear elevation of **Brazil** as a priority, with three high-level missions.

Despite political unpredictability, prospects for concluding the long-awaited EU-**Mercosur** Partnership Agreement have improved. President von der Leyen's announcement on 6 December 2024 confirmed the political agreement, followed by the Commission's proposal that the agreement be signed and concluded in September 2025. In anticipation of a new dialogue framework with civil society in Mercosur countries, the EESC should continue its proactive engagement with regional civil society organisations (including youth) and the Social and Economic Consultative Forum of Mercosur to ensure real involvement of civil society and the social partners within a body for monitoring and evaluating the agreement effectively. The EESC will also work on establishing domestic advisory groups with Chile and Mexico.

The scope of our strategic priorities in bi-regional engagement is also shaped by the outcomes of the EU-CELAC Summit in Santa Marta, in which the EESC participated in November 2025. To deepen EU-Latin America relations, the EESC will focus on the following thematic areas:

- **Investment and reindustrialisation:** reinforce the EU's role as Latin America's main partner by promoting sustainable investments that respect social and environmental safeguards, strengthen local value chains, and avoid extractive dependency;
- **Trade and raw materials:** support the green energy transition through sustainable sourcing and fair trade principles, ensuring energy sovereignty and resilience for local economies;
- **Environmental protection and climate justice:** leverage Latin America's biodiversity (50% of global total) while embedding climate justice principles, early-warning systems for climate risks, and differentiated support for rural, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities;
- **Digital alliance and technology access:** Advance digital sovereignty and equitable access to green technologies through initiatives such as the EU-LAC Supercomputing Network and BELLA cable expansion, prioritizing connectivity for remote areas;
- **Social inclusion and civic space:** address inequalities and empowering women, youth and vulnerable groups, embedding the Bi-Regional Care Pact, and guaranteeing civic space, safety for human rights defenders, and implementation of the Escazú Agreement;
- **Shared values and democratic governance:** uphold democracy, human rights and a multilateral rules-based order while strengthening media freedom, combating disinformation, and protecting civic participation;
- **Emerging areas for strategic resilience:** explore cooperation on competitiveness, defence, disaster risk management, food security, and water governance in light of increasing global instability;
- **Monitoring Global Gateway (GG) projects:** ensure transparency, civil society participation, and gender-sensitive assessments in evaluating the outcomes of GG in Latin America.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- two meetings of the EU-Latin America Follow-up Committee;
- participation of a REX delegation in the meetings of the EuroLat Joint Parliamentary Assembly and its standing committees;
- meeting of the EU-Brazil Round Table in Brussels;
- exploratory mission to Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay to strengthen interinstitutional relations with the Consultative Economic and Social Forum of Mercosur (*tbc*);
- work on the expected impacts of the EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement for each of the regions concerned (*tbc*).

2.2.3 Russia and Central Asia

While relations have been broken off with the official representation of Russian civil society because of its support for the regime and the war against Ukraine, it is important to remain in touch with Russian civil society in exile, which opposes the war and the regime and is in continuous contact with the remaining free civil society organisations in the country. Meetings with Russian civil society in exile will continue according to the current arrangements, which provide for the regular presence of free Russian civil society at the EESC both to present their problems and make requests to the EU institutions and to participate in our meetings and provide valuable contacts and speakers for various EESC initiatives (conferences against disinformation, participation in section meetings and events, etc.). Following the successful completion of four conferences against disinformation (in Bulgaria, Moldova, Greece and Portugal), a further such conference could be envisaged.

Following the abolition of the EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-up Committee, it will be important to find new avenues for engaging with the five Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan, with which intense contacts were established during the preparation of a dedicated opinion on the country and the organisation of a study visit to Astana and Almaty. Central Asian countries are indeed very challenging in terms of civil society engagement as the civic space is very restricted. Enhancing the capacity of independent civil society to develop and to participate in public life should be one of the main objectives for engaging with organisations from Central Asia. Civil society is the foundation of democratic governance and should be empowered in promoting transparency, advocating for human rights, and ensuring that development is inclusive and sustainable.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- a conference against disinformation, with a dedicated campaign (*tbc*);
- a REX section meeting or a seminar on Central Asia (*tbc*).

2.2.5 Transatlantic relations

The Transatlantic Relations Follow-Up Committee (TRFC) pursues a targeted programme to reinforce the EESC's engagement with key partners in the United States and Canada. Given the enduring strategic

significance of transatlantic relations at a time when political uncertainty, evolving trade dynamics, and renewed tariff pressures underline the need for steady, values-based cooperation, the TRFC's work contributes directly to fostering structured and meaningful dialogue with civil society in the partner countries. Its activities, in this time of US-led geoeconomic competition will focus on advancing civil society engagement in areas such as trade and technology, climate and energy, security and defence, workers' rights and the social dimension, as well as digital governance and democratic resilience. Regular exchanges with EU institutions, think tanks and civil society actors, alongside fact-finding missions where appropriate, will ensure that the Committee's work remains evidence-driven, forward-looking and aligned with the EESC's wider external relations agenda. Through this approach, the TRFC aims to reinforce the role of organised civil society in supporting a stable, mutually beneficial and future-oriented transatlantic partnership.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- mission to the United States;
- own-initiative opinion/evaluation report covering EU-US, EU-Canada, and cross-cutting transatlantic themes;
- two meetings of the Transatlantic Follow-Up Committee, in Brussels.

2.2.6. Japan and East Asia

Due to various geopolitical tensions and its desire to broaden its contacts with like-minded partners around the world, the EU is looking to develop closer relations with the countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The remit of the EU-Japan Follow-Up Committee has therefore been extended to include East and South-East Asia.

Following the extension of its remit, the EU-East and South-East Asia Follow-Up Committee will not only dedicate its work to Japan but also identify EU key interests in East and South-East Asia. This will include keeping an eye on the state of play of the ongoing trade negotiations with ASEAN countries and attempting to get an overview of civil society in the countries in the region, in particular those countries with which the EU is negotiating free trade agreements that provide for the establishment of domestic advisory groups. The main focus of the follow-up committee will, however, continue to be Japan, building further on information received and contact established during the latest mission to Japan in October 2023. For the relations with East and South-East Asia, domestic advisory groups are already set up and running for South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Viet Nam, with the participation of three EESC members in each of them, focusing on the implementation of the trade and sustainable development chapters of the respective trade agreements.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- two meetings of the EU East and South-East Asia Follow-up Committee;

- follow-up on the 2025 information report on *The situation of civil society organisations in the ASEAN countries*.

2.2.7 China

As a rising global power, China is important for the EU for both economic and strategic reasons. After a long break caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation with the China Economic and Social Council through the EU-China Round Table was restarted during the EESC's previous term of office. The round table met in Beijing in December 2024, discussing economic cooperation and the circular economy. At a meeting in Madrid in June 2025 the round table focussed on connectivity and infrastructure investment (Global Gateway vs. Belt and Road Initiative) as well as on climate finance. There is now a firm intention to continue to hold annual meetings of the EU-China Round Table. The 21st round table meeting is due to be held in China in 2026.

The round table should continue working on economic and trade policy issues, but also on other topics that are in line with the priorities of the EESC president, who co-chairs the round table. One such topic could be the eradication of poverty, including efforts to increase access to affordable housing. Over the past four decades, China has lifted nearly 800 million people out of poverty. The European Commission's 2026 Work Programme also mentions an anti-poverty strategy as a new non-legislative initiative, scheduled to be adopted in the first quarter of the year. It could be interesting for the round table to analyse and discuss the different approaches taken by both the EU and China in addressing poverty. This could include examining efforts to expand employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, and initiatives to enhance access to education and healthcare.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- 21st meeting of the EU-China Round Table in China + preparatory meeting in Brussels;
- Participation in the China Economic and Social Forum in Hangzhou (*tbc*).

2.2.8 India

The EU-India Cooperation Agreement, signed in 1994, paved the way for stronger bilateral ties. The relationship was upgraded to a 'strategic partnership' during the 5th India-EU summit, held in The Hague in 2004. The year 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of the EU-India Strategic Partnership gaining momentum, as India seeks a multi-polar world and deeper cooperation with the EU. Key areas of focus include trade, the green and digital transitions, connectivity and security.

Following the EESC's opinion on the *EU-India Strategic Partnership*, it is important to further explore avenues for enhanced cooperation and continued EESC involvement in activities relating to India, including by following the negotiations of the EU-India agreement and ensuring that it contains meaningful sustainable development obligations and civil society monitoring.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- EESC mission to India involving civil society organisations and the social partners (*tbc*);
- cultural event or exhibition in connection with the upcoming India-EU Summit.

2.3. International trade

2025 saw the acceleration of the ongoing shifts in global trade. The wave of US tariffs introduced under the USA's new administration – targeting the EU, China and other major partners – has deepened global trade fragmentation and heightened uncertainty for European exporters and consumers alike. These measures, alongside rising protectionist trends elsewhere, highlight the need for the EU to pursue a balanced approach combining openness with economic security and strategic autonomy.

To pursue these goals by increasing trade diversification and market access, the EU has continued its work on the free trade agreement agenda. The EU-Mercosur Agreement is currently the subject of a political debate concerning its signature and ratification, while the EU-Chile interim trade agreement has entered into force and its 'advanced framework agreement' is subject to partial provisional application. Negotiations with India have continued with a new political impetus, despite outstanding difficulties. The same is true for the revived talks with Australia, where access to agricultural markets remains the main sticking point. On the other hand, negotiations with Indonesia have been successfully concluded.

Trade and economic security would be a relevant and strategic communication priority for REX, as we entered a structural phase of geopolitical tension, supply-chain vulnerability and weaponisation of economic interdependence. The EU finalised a new, upgraded economic security strategy, a topic that we have been closely following since our own opinion on the 2023 Economic Security Strategy

The Section will follow changes in the EU legislation which impact external trade and EU competitiveness such as the new sustainability reporting and due-diligence rules under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), and the changes to the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

The European Parliament has also adopted its position on the revision of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Screening Regulation, broadening the scope of sectors subject to mandatory screening, enhancing central coordination and strengthening the role of the Commission.

Despite a challenging international situation, it is important to notice that trends identified in the Commission's Communication on *An open, sustainable and assertive trade policy* in 2021 such as 'global uncertainty ..., fuelled by political and geo-economic tensions', 'growing unilateralism' and 'consequent disruption or bypassing of multilateral institutions' persist and are intensifying, and that **it is important that the EU continue to apply the actions defined in this communication to be sure to shape global rules for a more sustainable and fairer globalisation.**

The Section will also work on the possible ways for strengthening the European economic security in line with the actions to be envisaged under the new EU economic security doctrine and will recommend

additional measures for strengthening the resilience of supply chains and internationalisation of the European SMEs. The impact of Artificial intelligence (AI) on international trade will be assessed to ensure AI can create new growth opportunities in all economies as trade can play a central role in making AI work for all as AI could boost the value of cross-border flows of goods and services by nearly 40% by 2040 thanks to productivity gains and lower trade costs.

Meanwhile, at the multilateral level, the World Trade Organization (WTO) reform agenda has moved closer to the centre-stage, even though the short-term outlook remains bleak and the ambitions for the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) in 2026 very limited.

In this context, 2026 will be yet another crucial year for EU trade policy and for its contributions to and implications for other key EU policies. The REX section will convey and coordinate the views of civil society across all of the above-mentioned areas, with a focus on consistency and a cross-sectoral approach. The section will keep pursuing improved communication on international trade and its implications and will call for further involvement of civil society with regard to EU policy-making and ongoing negotiations, including at WTO level.

Monitoring by civil society of the negotiation, implementation and enforcement of trade agreements will remain a key focus area. The section will continue to monitor EU bilateral and regional trade negotiations, as well as their ratification processes. The REX secretariat will continue to provide administrative and policy support to the DAGs addressing horizontal challenges and cross-cutting topics through an improved ‘allDAGs’ coordination structure. The REX section will work towards the improvement of effectiveness of the Domestic Advisory Groups at EU level and in the partner countries and on leveraging and promoting the impact on their work. Given the increasing number of EU DAGs the Secretariat of the Section should also work towards optimising the support to the DAGs in coordination with DG Trade.

After a one-year hiatus, the successful experience of the TSD Civil Society Forum will resume and build on the lessons learned from the first three editions.

The section will also follow the WTO’s work and reform process, focusing on the road to MC14 (March 2026), and will actively contribute to working sessions and bilateral meetings at the annual WTO Public Forum (September 2026).

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- fourth Civil Society Forum on Trade and Sustainable Development;
- three meetings of the EESC International Trade Follow-Up Committee;
- annual mission to Geneva;
- attendance at the WTO Ministerial Conference 14 (March 2026)
- participation in the WTO Public Forum (September 2026);
- two per EU DAG, with related DAG-to-DAG meetings and joint workshops (in total +/- 50 meetings for the 12 DAGs currently active);
- one ‘allDAGs’ meeting and ad hoc meetings of ‘allDAG’ presidencies;
- cooperation with the WTO secretariat on exploring ways to make civil society involvement at WTO level more effective;

- deepening of cooperation with UNCTAD, ILO and other international organisation on issues related to trade and sustainable development.

2.4. Soft diplomacy and horizontal activities

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

In recent years, the European Commission and the EEAS have decided to put a specific emphasis on various kinds of soft diplomacy, such as **economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, blue diplomacy, climate diplomacy, health diplomacy, digital diplomacy, diplomacy and disabilities**, etc. This trend culminated with the organisation of the first edition of the European Public Diplomacy Week in 2025, in which the REX section was actively involved, together with the main EU institutions. The EESC is a natural partner of the other institutions in the field of soft diplomacy due to its experience and its network of civil society contacts. There is therefore a need to strengthen and improve the work done by the REX section in these fields, as well as its cooperation with relevant international organisations and UN bodies. In accordance with the Commission work programme for 2026, the REX Section will request referrals regarding communications on the humanitarian aid and the Global Health Resilience.

Cooperation with economic and social councils in partner countries will also be continued through the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with the International Association of Economic and Social Councils (AICESIS), and ongoing cooperation with the Union of African Economic and Social Councils, the Africa Union ECOSOCC and the Consultative Economic and Social Forum of MERCOSUR.

Disinformation

In 2023, the EESC launched a project aimed at involving civil society in the fight against **Russian disinformation and foreign interference**. The project comprised a series of three conferences, accompanied by targeted awareness-raising campaigns on social media, to be held in EU Member States and candidate countries. The venues were Sofia, Bulgaria (June 2023); Chișinău, Moldova (April 2024); Athens, Greece (November 2024); and Lisbon, Portugal (May 2025). Disinformation has also been one of the main topics of our work within the EU-Brazil Round Table. It is important for the REX section to reflect on how to continue the project on disinformation and, if necessary, to establish cooperation with other EESC sections.

Blue diplomacy

Following the **EESC's call for a Blue Deal**, it is important to follow up on recent opinions on **Blue diplomacy and climate migration** to explore avenues for the practical application of blue diplomacy and water-related solutions as instruments of peace and prosperity in the global regions most exposed to water stress. Cooperation with relevant civil society organisations will also be developed in this respect. With a view to deepening the cooperation on blue diplomacy, the Memorandum of Understanding between the EESC and the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) could be

signed. The REX section should reflect on how to continue this project in cooperation with other EESC sections.

Migration

Migration will remain at the top of the EU agenda. Migratory pressure on the EU is likely to intensify as a consequence of the situation in the Middle East, as well as other ongoing conflicts. The phenomenon of climate-related migration is also intensifying and there is no legal framework for such migration in the EU. The REX section will closely monitor the issue of migration together with the SOC section.

Cultural diplomacy

The Section has worked for some years on the issue of cultural diplomacy and prepared an impactful opinion. With the publication of the new Cultural Compass for Europe on 12 November which foresees an update of the EU strategy on international cultural relations, with a specific focus on the enlargement and the Mediterranean, specific actions on cultural diplomacy can be integrated into these files.

Resilience, preparedness and foresight

Resilience, preparedness and foresight are increasingly important in the current geopolitical environment. The REX Section will try to integrate these issues in all the regional files, in accordance with the European Preparedness Union strategy, in order to ensure that the EU can be a reliable global player that can navigate the current geopolitical environment on its own terms while also respecting Global Public Goods such as peace, universal human rights and the environment. Specific actions can be taken to enhance the ability of third countries' civil society organisations, in particular enlargement and neighbouring partners', resilience on tackling hybrid, climate, and foreign information manipulation and interference threats. As a number of armed conflicts are ongoing in the world, the REX Section will ensure, while working with civil society from the countries and regions concerned, that civil society organisations contribute effectively for a just peace that includes the conditions for societies to advance towards the good governance and sustainable development. The civil society should be also actively involved in preventing diplomacy and in helping addressing the root causes of emerging conflicts. The civil society should insist that the EU put a further emphasis on preventive diplomacy in the framework of the EU civilian CFSP compact.

We will closely monitor the external aspects of the initiatives announced in the Commission's 2026 Work Programme. In view of the current instability in some regions, it will be important to follow up on the opinion the REX section is preparing on the European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region.

ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2026:

- continuation of the EESC's project on disinformation (*tbc*);
- participation in World Water Week in Stockholm (August 2026) (*tbc*);
- Preparation of opinions on the future of the EU humanitarian aid and on global health resilience;
- participation in the European Public Diplomacy Week (*tbc*).