



April-July 2026 ■ eesc.europa.eu/rex ■ [@EESC_REX / X](https://twitter.com/EESC_REX/X)

PLENARY REXCLUSIVES



ENLARGEMENT IS ABOUT PEOPLE: BUILDING SAFER AND STRONGER EUROPE TOGETHER

In today's volatile geopolitical climate, EU enlargement is more than a political objective. It is an investment in Europe's security, stability and prosperity.

That was the main message from the EESC's high-level debate on 16 July, which brought together European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, political representatives and civil society partners from candidate countries.

"Enlargement is not only about institutions and negotiations. It is about people, a whole-of-society exercise," said EESC President Séamus Boland. Participants stressed that economic convergence must go hand in hand with democratic reform, the rule of law and fundamental rights, and that citizens must be able to see and feel the benefits.

Commissioner Kos made the case clearly: every previous enlargement has been an economic success. But the debate also carried a warning. The EU cannot afford “grey zones” in its neighbourhood, where political vacuums leave space for competing powers.

Above all, enlargement cannot be delivered by governments alone. Employers, trade unions and civil society organisations need a real role throughout the process. Their involvement is crucial to building public trust, keeping reforms on track and connecting accession negotiations with everyday concerns.

The EESC’s Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs) initiative is already putting this into practice by bringing civil society representatives from candidate countries directly into the Committee’s advisory work.

The future of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova lies in the EU. Civil society will be central to helping them get there, and to ensuring that a larger Union is also a stronger and more cohesive one.



FREEDOM CANNOT BE SILENCED: STANDING WITH DEMOCRATIC BELARUS

“Once you have tasted freedom, you will never give it away. Invest in civil society, because its power is the weakness of every dictatorship.” With these words, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, leader of the Belarusian democratic forces, addressed the EESC plenary on strengthening EU engagement with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. The message was clear: a free and democratic Belarus is part of Europe’s future. Moreover, supporting Ukraine is closely linked to that future. By helping Ukraine defend its sovereignty, Europe is also creating the conditions for Belarus to break free from repression.

Ms Tsikhanouskaya visited the EESC exactly one year after the EESC and the Belarusian democratic forces signed their Memorandum of Understanding. In addition to taking stock of its implementation, she participated in a lunch debate entitled *Beyond the Myths: Understanding Belarus in Today's Europe*, which sought to challenge common misconceptions about Belarus and its people. The event brought together around 100 participants and stressed that solidarity with cannot stop at words. Belarusian civil society needs sustained investment, practical support and the EU’s unwavering commitment. Europe must stand with those fighting for freedom for

as long as it takes. More than 800 political prisoners remain behind bars in Belarus. To mark the first anniversary of the release of her husband, Ms Tsikhanouskaya and President Boland issued a joint video-message calling for the freedom for every political prisoner in Belarus.

Video message - EESC President and Ms Tsikhanouskaya

ENLARGEMENT & NEIGHBOURHOOD



TRUST AND PARTNERSHIP AT THE HEART OF ENLARGEMENT

On 29 May 2026, the EESC organised its flagship EU-Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference in Vienna under the auspices of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU. Bringing together around 120 representatives of social partners, civil society organisations, EU and international institutions and policymakers from across the region and Austria, the conference explored how organised civil society can help advance enlargement, strengthen democratic resilience and support socio-economic convergence in the Western Balkans.

The conference was also about [winning the hearts and minds of EU citizens on enlargement](#). “EU enlargement is a geopolitical imperative for a stronger, more secure and more prosperous Europe, but we can’t take the support of citizens in the EU or the Western Balkans for granted,” said EESC President Séamus Boland. “Civil society must be at the heart of this process, building bridges between the EU and the Western Balkans and helping deliver the reforms and prosperity that enlargement can bring.” Participants reaffirmed that enlargement remains a geostrategic investment in a stable, secure and united Europe and highlighted the need to maintain a credible, merit-based accession process. They stressed the importance of rule of law, media freedom, anti-corruption efforts and meaningful civil society participation in reforms linked to the EU Growth Plan.

Adopted [conclusions](#) were transmitted to EU and national authorities as a civil society contribution to the EU–Western Balkans Summit held in Tivat shortly afterwards.

For more information about the conference: [EU–Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference](#)



CELEBRATING EUROPE DAY WITH EU CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

For the third consecutive year, REX Section shared its Europe Day stand with representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine. Together, they celebrated Europe's diversity and brought the enlargement process closer to visitors by showcasing their countries' hospitality and rich cultural heritage.



CIVIL SOCIETY DRIVING MOLDOVA'S EUROPEAN FUTURE

During his mission to Moldova, EESC President Séamus Boland held high-level talks with President Maia Sandu, Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu, Speaker of Parliament Igor Grosu, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Cristina Gherasimov and Minister of Labour and Social Protection Natalia Plugaru. He also met representatives of civil society, social partners and young people. The visit reaffirmed the EESC's strong support for Moldova's European path, with a focus on reform delivery, democratic and economic resilience, social protection and tangible improvements for citizens.

President Boland also opened the 17th EU–Moldova Civil Society Platform, marking nearly a decade of structured dialogue between EU and Moldovan civil society. Participants stressed that trust, inclusion and the meaningful engagement of civil society and social partners are essential to sustaining reform momentum and ensuring a transparent and inclusive accession process.



UKRAINIANS IN THE EU: PRESENT AND FUTURE

As temporary protection for people fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine is expected to continue until March 2028, the EU is now looking beyond emergency response towards legal certainty, integration and, when conditions allow, safe and dignified return.

On 10 July 2026, the EESC, together with the Foundation European Dialogue and the Lower Silesia office of Solidarność, held a discussion in Wrocław, Poland, as a follow-up to its opinion on a Predictable and common way forward for Ukrainians in the EU. Employers, trade unions and civil society organisations exchanged views on how to support Ukrainians living under temporary protection and prepare for the next phase.

With more than four million Ukrainians in the EU, Member States need a predictable framework that clarifies legal pathways, strengthens administrative capacity and allows people to make informed choices about integration or future return. The debate highlighted the key role of organised civil society, which have provided emergency support, advice, language learning, job matching, education, childcare and psychological assistance since the first days of displacement. Cooperation with public authorities remains essential for longer-term inclusion.

Labour market integration was a central topic. Speakers noted that many Ukrainians are ready to work, but qualification mismatch, slow recognition of diplomas, and informal work can prevent people from using their skills and leave them vulnerable. Trade unions emphasised equal treatment, fair working conditions and protection from exploitation.

Integration also depends on access to education, language learning, childcare, mental health support and services for vulnerable groups. Children and young people should be integrated into host-country education systems while maintaining their connection to Ukrainian language and culture.

The overall message was clear: displaced Ukrainians need protection for as long as return is not safe, but also clear information, fair access to rights and realistic pathways for the future. Any return to Ukraine must be voluntary, safe and sustainable.



UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN PATH: CIVIL SOCIETY STEPS UP

The 19th EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform met ahead of the June European Council, as Ukraine's accession process enters a decisive phase. Participants reviewed the implementation of the Association Agreement and Ukraine's progress towards EU membership, focusing on civil society's role in the Reform Agenda, youth engagement and the country's energy sector.

The Platform called for continued momentum on enlargement and called for opening of all accession clusters in near future. Its members stressed that civil society is not only a watchdog, but also an essential partner in shaping reforms, strengthening accountability and advancing Ukraine's European future.



GEORGIA: DEMOCRATIC VOICES STAND FIRM

On 11 June 2026, the EESC hosted an EU-Georgia meeting bringing together EU and Georgian civil society representatives. The discussions took place against the backdrop of frozen EU-Georgia relations, democratic backsliding and growing pressure on civil society, journalists and activists in Georgia, while also underlining the continued resilience of Georgian civil society and its commitment to democratic values and the country's European aspirations.

The meeting addressed the shrinking space for independent civil society and media in Georgia, as well as Georgia's role in strengthening Europe's connectivity and competitiveness. The EESC reaffirmed its continued engagement with Georgian civil society through the Enlargement Candidate Members initiative and regular exchanges with Georgian organisations, stressing that civil society remains an essential partner in promoting accountability, protecting fundamental rights and keeping dialogue open in challenging times.



MONTENEGRO MOVES TO THE FINAL STAGES OF ACCESSION TO THE EU

The 22nd meeting of the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) took place in Podgorica on 24 April 2026, bringing together representatives of organised civil society from Montenegro and the European Union to discuss the country's progress towards EU membership. Discussions were held in a form of a round table and focused on the accession process, implementation of the Reform Agenda and Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, social policy and employment, preparations for

the next EU budget cycle, and the situation of civil society in Montenegro. Maida Gorčević, Minister of European Affairs, and Naida Nišić, Minister of Labour, Employment, and Social Dialogue, both actively participated in the discussions demonstrating the importance the Government of Montenegro gives to this civil society body.

The JCC welcomed Montenegro's continued progress in accession negotiations, including the provisional closure of additional negotiating chapters and the establishment of an EU working group tasked with preparing the accession treaty. At the same time, members stressed the importance of maintaining reform momentum, safeguarding the rule of law, ensuring genuine involvement of organised civil society and strengthening social dialogue. A joint declaration adopted by consensus reaffirmed the Committee's strong support for Montenegro's European future.

For more information: [22nd meeting of the EU-Montenegro JCC](#)



ALBANIA'S ACCESSION PROCESS GAINS MOMENTUM AT 3RD EU–ALBANIA JCC MEETING

The 3rd meeting of the EU–Albania Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) was held in Tirana on 4 June 2026 and brought together representatives of social partners, civil society organisations and public authorities from Albania and the European Union. Discussions centred on Albania's accession negotiations, implementation of reforms under the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, preparations for participation in the EU Single Market, consumer protection, and the state of civil society and social dialogue. The meeting was notably opened to a wider audience beyond JCC members, encouraging broader stakeholder engagement.

Participants welcomed the significant progress achieved in Albania's accession process, including the confirmation that the country had met the interim benchmarks of the Fundamentals Cluster. The joint declaration adopted by consensus called for continued reforms, stronger involvement of social partners and civil society in the accession process, and accelerated preparations for gradual integration into the EU Single Market. The JCC reaffirmed its readiness to contribute constructively as Albania enters a crucial phase of its path towards EU membership.

The JCC also addressed a number of issues that have recently attracted considerable public attention in Albania such as concerns related to the protection of Albania's natural heritage. In the joint declaration the JCC raised questions regarding alignment with EU nature protection standards, transparency in decision-making and the effective protection of environmentally sensitive areas.

For more information: [3rd EU-Albania Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee meeting](#)



KEEPING DIALOGUE ALIVE: EU-TÜRKİYE JCC MEETS IN ANKARA

How can dialogue continue when political relations become more difficult? This question was at the heart of the 43rd meeting of the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), held in Ankara on 25 and 26 June 2026.

Co-chaired by Ioannis Vardakastanis for the EESC and M. Rifat Hisarcıklıoğlu for the Turkish side, the meeting brought together representatives of organised civil society from both sides to discuss the future of EU-Türkiye relations. REX President Stefano Palmieri underlined the importance of maintaining dialogue between organised civil society as an indispensable pillar of the broader relationship between the European Union and Türkiye.

The Committee adopted two joint reports. [The first, presented by EESC rapporteur Claudio Cappellini](#), explored how SMEs can strengthen their resilience, competitiveness, quality employment and sustainable transformation in an increasingly uncertain economic environment. [The second, presented by EESC rapporteurs Maurizio Mensi and Vesko Mitov](#), focused on the economic, social and governance dimensions of digital transformation, highlighting the need for innovation that is both competitive and human-centred.

Building on these reports, the two sides adopted a [Joint Declaration](#) setting out common priorities for future cooperation. The declaration reaffirmed the strategic importance of EU-Türkiye relations and highlighted the role of organised civil society in supporting dialogue, social cohesion and sustainable economic development.

The conclusion of the Ankara meeting demonstrated once again that, even in challenging times, organised civil society can build bridges, foster mutual understanding and help keep the EU-Türkiye relationship moving forward.



ARMENIA-EU DIALOGUE GAINS GROUND

The 8th meeting of the EU–Armenia Civil Society Platform took place in Yerevan, bringing together EESC members and their Armenian counterparts. Discussions focused on ongoing reforms, security and democratic resilience, as well as the role of organised civil society in strengthening EU-Armenia relations. Participants particularly appreciated the address by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The constructive exchange provided valuable momentum ahead of the upcoming EU–Armenia Summit.

DAGs in THE SPOTLIGHT

WHERE IN THE WORLD ARE THE DAGs?

This edition's Spotlight shines on one of REX's unique activities: the network of Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs), managed in close cooperation with DG Trade of the European Commission.

Trade agreements attract attention during negotiations, political debates and final signatures. But what happens after the ink dries? How do we make sure commitments on labour rights, environmental protection and sustainable development actually become reality? That's where the DAGs come in.

What is a DAG?

A DAG is a body made up of representatives of employers, workers and civil society organisations that monitors the implementation of the Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters of EU trade agreements.

DAGs are active across the globe. Today, REX supports DAGs linked with Canada, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, CARIFORUM, New Zealand, Kenya, Chile, the United Kingdom, Central America, the Andean Region (Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) and the Eastern European Region (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).

Over the years, DAGs have become an increasingly important channel for bringing practical experience and on-the-ground perspectives into trade policy discussions. They help ensure that the voices of workers, businesses and civil society are heard alongside those of governments and institutions.

So the next time you hear discussions about a DAG meeting, an All-DAGs meeting, a DAG-to-DAG meeting or a DAG joint statement, you will know there is much more behind the dagger acronym than meets the eye. Behind every DAG is a network of people working across continents to help ensure that trade and sustainable development go hand in hand.



EU DAGs CHART THE WAY FORWARD

On 2 July 2026, the EESC brought together all EU Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) alongside representatives of the European Commission, European Parliament and civil society, for the fifth All DAGs meeting.

As the EU's network of trade agreements continues to expand, discussions focused on how DAGs can manage their growing responsibilities while continuing to provide meaningful, evidence-based advice. Four interactive sessions examined the use of the Single-Entry Point for complaints, civil society involvement in new trade partnerships, the organisation of the expanding DAG network, and closer cooperation with the European Parliament.

Participants called for stronger coordination and exchange of expertise across DAGs, a more systematic role for EU Delegations in supporting civil society in partner countries, and closer links with parliamentary monitoring groups and relevant Commission services. They also stressed the need to ensure meaningful participation in emerging frameworks, including

critical raw materials partnerships and other strategic agreements.



EU AND CANADIAN CIVIL SOCIETY UNITE FOR RESILIENT, SUSTAINABLE TRADE

From 1 to 4 June, the EU and Canadian DAGs met in Ottawa for a series of joint civil society CETA meetings. A flagship example of transatlantic civil society cooperation, the gathering reaffirmed the importance of the EU-Canada partnership at a time of geopolitical tension, economic uncertainty and growing pressure on the rules-based international order.

Discussions, including dedicated Riverside Chats led by the DAGs, looked at how CETA can strengthen resilience and competitiveness while promoting open, inclusive and sustainable trade.

The DAGs were clear: geopolitical urgency and competitiveness must not come at the expense of workers' rights, environmental protection or democratic processes. Labour and environmental commitments must remain enforceable and central to CETA's implementation.

Their joint statement sets out concrete recommendations for turning these commitments into action. Its message is simple: economic prosperity, democratic values and sustainable development reinforce one another, and civil society must have a seat at the table.

[!\[\]\(3b71157eab31889e641f7620692f0b92_img.jpg\) Read the Final Joint Statement of the CETA DAGs \[here\]\(#\)](#)



ASIAN DAGs DISCUSS SHARED TRADE AND SUSTAINABILITY PRIORITIES

On 28 May 2026, the EU Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) for Korea, Singapore and Japan held their respective meetings alongside a joint session. The EU DAG for Korea prepared for its upcoming meetings with its Korean counterpart in Seoul in September 2026 and exchanged views on recent economic and business developments in Korea.

A key highlight of the meeting of the EU DAG for Singapore was an exchange with Singapore's Ambassador to the EU, H.E.

Heng Aik Yeow. The Ambassador reaffirmed Singapore's commitment to sustainable development, workforce development and cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), while the discussion underlined the importance of continued cooperation between civil society, public authorities and social partners. The EU DAG for Japan reviewed the outcomes of its Joint Dialogue with Japanese civil society, held in Tokyo in March 2026, and discussed human rights and environmental due diligence, responsible supply chains and the implementation of ILO conventions.

During the joint session, members of the three DAGs exchanged views with the European Commission's DG TRADE on the implementation of the respective Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) Chapters of the free trade agreements. Discussions also covered the implementation of ILO conventions in Singapore, Korea and Japan, as well as follow-up to the Commission's evaluation of the impact of EU trade agreements on key environmental aspects, including climate change.

The meetings reaffirmed the importance of continued civil society engagement in advancing the implementation of the trade and sustainable development agenda.



EU-CENTRAL AMERICA: MAKING COMMITMENTS COUNT

From 15 to 17 June 2026, the EESC hosted the annual joint events of the EU and Central American DAGs, bringing together civil society representatives, social partners, regional institutions and public authorities under the EU-Central America Association Agreement. The programme combined a workshop with experts from the ILO and CENPROTYPE, the annual DAG-to-DAG meeting and the 12th Civil Society Dialogue Forum. The DAGs adopted a Joint Declaration calling for effective follow-up to the commitments made in Costa Rica in 2025. Discussions focused on labour rights, social dialogue, environmental sustainability and the implementation of the Agreement's Trade and Sustainable Development chapter. Particular attention was given to freedom of association, decent work, support for SMEs, sustainable value chains and compliance with the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

The DAGs also brought these priorities directly to their respective authorities during a joint exchange with the TSD Board. The three-day programme reaffirmed their shared goal: an Association Agreement that delivers more sustainable, inclusive and people-centred trade on both sides.



3RD MEETING OF THE EU DAG UNDER THE EU-NEW ZEALAND FTA

The EU DAG set up under the EU-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and tasked with advising on its implementation held its third meeting at EESC premises, on 11 May 2026.

The meeting saw the participation of representatives from DG Trade, reporting on the FTA implementation status, as well as on the activities of the counterpart DAG. In an engagement with MEP Saskia Bricmont (Greens/EFA) members discussed the European Parliament's role in monitoring the implementation of this FTA. Ms Bricmont recalled her group's support for the agreement, notably because of its enforceable Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) provisions and its Sustainable Food Systems chapter. Ms Bricmont also encouraged the DAG to provide concrete input to the Parliament and suggested stronger links with its monitoring structures. Members also made presentations on green shipping corridors, sustainable food systems, and labour and social clauses.



25TH MEETING OF THE EU-COLOMBIA/PERU/ECUADOR DAG

The 25th meeting of the EU-Colombia/Peru/Ecuador DAG, held on 20 April 2026, focused on the political, social, labour and environmental situation in the Andean countries and on the implementation of the EU-Colombia/Peru/Ecuador Trade Agreement. The Group invited representatives from the EEAS, the European Commission and the ILO, to discuss democratic governance, human rights, labour rights and trade relations. The debates highlighted ongoing political instability, security challenges and concerns over rule of law, labour rights violations and environmental degradation across the region.

The Commission outlined continued growth in trade and ongoing cooperation on labour and environmental issues, while acknowledging persistent challenges, including in labour rights and gender equality. Participants also raised concerns regarding complaints submitted through the EU Single Entry Point, notably in Ecuador's banana sector, and called for stronger enforcement of sustainability and labour standards. The EU DAG stressed the need for continued monitoring of the agreement and will consider issuing recommendations on labour rights, human rights, environmental protection and social dialogue.



EU-UK RELATIONS KEEPING UP THE MOMENTUM

On 26-27 May, the DAGs set up under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and tasked with advising on its implementation, held their fifth joint meeting in Brussels at EESC premises. The UK and EU DAGs' attention reaffirmed their support for the renewed EU-UK agenda and the ongoing negotiations under the Common Understanding. Both DAGs stressed the importance of maintaining a positive momentum in this key bilateral relationship.

The second day was dedicated to the fourth Civil Society Forum (CSF). Open to civil society organisations representing businesses and employers, trade unions and other workers' representatives, NGOs and academics, this year's edition of the CSF discussed trade in services and goods, regulatory cooperation and the level playing field, energy and climate change, and more generally the TCA implementation in view of the EU-UK future relationship.



EU-VIETNAM DAG: COMMITMENTS UNDER SCRUTINY

The 15th meeting of the EU-Viet Nam DAG focused on labour rights, civic space and the implementation of the agreement's TSD chapter.

Members welcomed the creation of a new EU-Viet Nam Task Force and efforts to revive the agreement's institutional dialogue. However, they stressed that closer cooperation must be matched by tangible progress on sustainability, labour inspections and the ratification of ILO Convention No. 87 on

freedom of association. Concerns were also raised over the shrinking space for civil society and human rights defenders in Viet Nam. In an exchange with MEP Saskia Bricmont, members called for stronger DAG involvement in monitoring the agreement and closer cooperation with the European Parliament. Future work will focus on ILO commitments, sustainable fisheries, women's empowerment and the role of civil society in implementing the EU Forced Labour Regulation.

DAG voices concern over the EU-Viet Nam relations upgrade warning that lack of progress on labour & human rights & ongoing repression of civil society undermine the EU credibility on conditionality.

[!\[\]\(8c38bcc0fae4558cd7ebc6fc44ec565d_img.jpg\) Read full statement here.](#)

GLOBAL RELATIONS & STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS



ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: CIVIL SOCIETY TAKES THE FLOOR IN MEXICO

A REX delegation, led by President Stefano Palmieri, participated in the annual meetings of the Standing Committees of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat), held in Mexico City from 26 to 28 May 2026. The delegation contributed to discussions in the Political Affairs, Social Affairs and Sustainable Development Committees, addressing key shared challenges such as democratic governance, social inclusion, labour rights, energy transition and sustainable development. In particular, Mr Palmieri made a notable intervention in the Political Affairs Committee, underlining the importance of defending multilateralism and a rules-based international order in a complex geopolitical context.

The EESC delegation held dedicated exchanges with civil society, including participation in the EuroLat meeting with civil society, which focused on issues such as indigenous peoples' rights and migration dynamics between the EU and Latin America. In addition, the delegation organised three separate outreach meetings with representatives of Mexican employers, trade unions and civil society organisations, providing an opportunity to gather first-hand insights into the

country's economic, social and human rights situation and to discuss the implementation of the modernised EU-Mexico Global Agreement.

These exchanges confirmed the strong interest of Mexican stakeholders in strengthening structured dialogue with the EU, while also highlighting significant challenges, including labour informality, governance concerns, human rights issues and the need for more effective civil society participation. The EESC reaffirmed its commitment to supporting inclusive dialogue mechanisms, notably through Domestic Advisory Groups and the potential establishment of a Mexican Economic and Social Council, and to maintaining close engagement with civil society partners in the framework of EU-Mexico relations.



ESWATINI: EESC JOINS THE EU-AFRICA CONVERSATION

REX President Stefano Palmieri took part in the first plenary session of the EU–Africa Parliamentary Assembly under the Samoa Agreement, held in Eswatini from 12 to 14 May.

The Assembly brought together European and African parliamentarians to discuss peace and security, youth education and mobility, and women's role in agricultural value chains. Debates highlighted the need for stronger cooperation between the EU, the African Union and regional organisations, with parliaments, civil society, women and young people playing a central role in preventing conflict and building resilient societies.

Alongside the plenary, the REX delegation met Business Eswatini, the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland and CANGO, the country's main NGO platform. These exchanges offered first-hand insight into Eswatini's economic and social challenges, including high youth unemployment, limited economic diversification and a shrinking civic space.

Trade unions raised concerns over restrictions on freedom of assembly and strained relations with the government, while civil society representatives called for a structured forum for open dialogue with the authorities. Employers stressed the need to align education with labour-market needs and highlighted initiatives supporting women's economic empowerment.

The mission confirmed the importance of giving organised civil society a stronger voice in EU–Africa relations, and of ensuring that trade and cooperation support social dialogue, democratic standards and inclusive development.



THE EEA CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE DISCUSSES GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The 37th meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee (EEA CC) took place in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, on 26–27 May 2026, bringing together representatives of the EESC and the EFTA Consultative Committee to discuss the future of the EEA amid growing geopolitical and socio-economic challenges.

The highlight of the meeting was a keynote address by Liechtenstein's Prime Minister, H.E. Brigitte Haas, who emphasised the importance of international cooperation, economic openness and the rule of law. Members also adopted a Resolution on jobs, skills and fair labour mobility in the EEA, calling for stronger vocational training, lifelong learning, social dialogue and well-managed labour mobility across the 30 EEA countries.

The programme concluded with a visit to the Educational Centre of Oerlikon Balzers, showcasing Liechtenstein's dual vocational education system and its role in preparing young people for the labour market.



EU'S STRATEGIC APPROACH TO THE BLACK SEA REGION

On 11 and 12 May, as part of the follow-up to opinion REX/597 on the Black Sea Strategy, the REX section organised two events, one in Constanța and one in Varna. The objective of both events was to pave the way for the practical implementation of EESC opinion on the EU's strategic Approach to the Black Sea region.

Around 90 students attended the events, listened to the high-level speakers and actively participated in the debate. They mentioned the good timing of the EESC opinion and welcomed the bridge that had been created between Constanța and Varna

to promote cooperation in the region. As students are representative of young people, listening to their concerns was extremely useful because they represent the future of the Black Sea region.

10 main recommendations were formulated after the event, among which the need for investment in energy and connectivity, the need to find solutions to the cost-of-living crisis affecting young people, the importance of continuing our efforts to build bridges through trust, innovation and cooperation, and the need to move from vision to implementation of the strategy, so that the Black Sea region can turn into a hub of security, stability and prosperity.



ANNUAL ALL-ISLAND STAKEHOLDER FORUM

The Annual All-Island Stakeholder Forum was organised by the European Economic and Social Committee together with an All-Island Advisory Group of representative organisations from the three ‘pillars’ of the EESC from both jurisdictions. This year’s forum, which was the second edition, took place on 10 and 11 June in Dublin and was titled: Reset and Recharge: All-island contributions to a resilient EU-UK relationship. It included keynote addresses from Her Excellency Kara Owen and Minister for European Affairs Thomas Byrne.

The Annual All-Island Stakeholder Forum is an ambitious EESC initiative – gathering a wide range of business, trade unions and civil society stakeholders on the island together to share insights and expertise on common concerns post-Brexit.

Participation was warmly encouraged from worker, employer and civil society organisations across the island, with the recognition that this was a unique opportunity to raise awareness and knowledge of the topic, as well as to identify outstanding opportunities and challenges. The 104 in person and online attendees were encouraged to submit comments and raise questions so that evidence- and experience-based insights was shared. Such evidence and experience were translated into specific recommendations for the EESC’s EU-UK Follow-up Committee.



CARIFORUM-EU CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE: CIVIL SOCIETY CALLS FOR A STRONGER VOICE

On 12 June 2025, the EESC held the 9th meeting of the CARIFORUM–EU Consultative Committee, bringing together civil society representatives from the Caribbean and the European Union to discuss key developments in CARIFORUM–EU relations. The agenda included updates on the implementation of the CARIFORUM–EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), the provisional application of the OACPS–EU Samoa Agreement in relation to CARIFORUM, and the revision of the EPA review process. The consultative committee members also adopted a joint statement, which was presented by EU Co-Chair Sandra Parthie to the Joint CARIFORUM–EU Council on 19 June.

The joint statement called for stronger civil society involvement in EPA governance, including regular opportunities for the Committee’s co-chairs to present its recommendations to CARIFORUM–EU institutions. It also highlighted priorities such as full implementation of the regional preference clause, deeper cooperation on climate resilience and renewable energy, and better implementation of commitments on cultural cooperation, services, professional mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications. In addition, the Committee underlined the need to uphold labour standards, strengthen social dialogue, support MSMEs, and ensure the continued participation of women, young people, trade unions, farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and SMEs in the implementation and review of the EPA.



REX SECTION - 17 APRIL 2026

The 234th meeting of the REX Section brought together members for discussions on some of the most pressing issues shaping the EU's external relations. A message came through loud and clear: today's geopolitical challenges require stronger partnerships and greater involvement of organised civil society.

Timely debate on the Middle East

Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving regional crisis, REX members exchanged views with leading experts and representatives from both Israeli and Palestinian civil society. The discussion explored the implications of the conflict for regional stability, energy security, humanitarian law and the wider geopolitical landscape.

Members stressed the importance of de-escalation, protecting civilians and maintaining humanitarian access, while highlighting the increasingly important role that civil society organisations can play in preserving dialogue during times of conflict. The debate also examined the consequences for Europe, including energy security, migration, trade and regional stability.



REX SECTION - 22 MAY 2026

How should Europe respond to a world of growing instability, strategic competition and pressure on the rules-based international order? This question shaped the REX section's strategic debate on 22 May.

Opening the discussions, REX President Stefano Palmieri called on Europe to strengthen its capacity to act in security, trade and energy, while deepening ties with its wider neighbourhood and democratic partners.

Henrik Yeritsyan, representing Armenia to the EU, highlighted the Yerevan European Political Community Summit and the first EU–Armenia Summit as important milestones in closer relations. He also reaffirmed Armenia's commitment to democratic reform, regional connectivity and reconciliation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Foreign policy expert Nathalie Tocci warned that the traditional pillars of European security, the EU, NATO and the OSCE, are under increasing strain. Canada's representative John Hannaford stressed the importance of closer transatlantic cooperation on defence, energy, critical raw materials, artificial intelligence and resilient supply chains.



REX SECTION - 7 JULY 2026

Europe and Africa are moving beyond traditional development cooperation towards a partnership built on shared interests. This shift was at the heart of the REX section's debate on 7 July.

Opening the discussion, Louis Cheick Sissoko, Presiding Officer of AU ECOSOCC, highlighted the growing role of organised civil society in shaping EU-Africa relations. Speakers explored three priorities: labour rights and inclusive growth, Africa's investment potential, and the continent's place in an increasingly multipolar world.

The debate reflected the breadth of the partnership, from trade, investment and energy to peace, security and the green and digital transitions. It also addressed persistent challenges, including food insecurity, climate change, youth unemployment and shrinking civic space.

Participants stressed that Global Gateway investments must deliver concrete benefits locally: decent jobs, stronger skills, sustainable development and meaningful civil society involvement. Building resilient food systems and ensuring local ownership will also be crucial.

The EESC's cooperation with AU ECOSOCC provides a strong basis for this work. Over the past two years, the partnership has advanced dialogue on global governance, gender equality, financing for development and civil society participation under the Samoa Agreement.

The section also discussed the Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy and Clean-Tech Cooperation Initiative, which aims to deliver cleaner and more affordable energy while creating new opportunities for investment, industrial

cooperation, skills and quality jobs on both sides of the Mediterranean.

REXPOSITIONS

STATEMENT OF THE BUREAU OF THE EXTERNAL RELATIONS SECTION ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

On 22 May 2026, the Bureau of the EESC Section for External Relations adopted a statement expressing serious concern about the escalating tensions in the Middle East and their human, political and economic consequences. It called for de-escalation, renewed negotiations and inclusive dialogue based on the UN Charter and the rules-based multilateral order. The Bureau underlined that civilians must be protected in all affected countries, that international humanitarian law must be fully respected, and that civil society organisations play an essential role in humanitarian assistance, community support and peacebuilding.

The Bureau also addressed several specific developments, including the fragile situation involving Iran and neighbouring countries, the human rights situation in Iran, the humanitarian emergency in Gaza, internal developments in Israel and the West Bank, and the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, which it welcomed as a possible opening towards peace and restored state sovereignty in Lebanon. Looking beyond the region, the statement highlighted the wider impact of the conflict on Europe and global stability, including energy prices, migration, nuclear non-proliferation, trade, supply chains, maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, food security in Africa and continued EU support for Ukraine. It called for stronger EU resilience, targeted support for vulnerable citizens and SMEs, and urgent diplomatic efforts to prevent further destabilisation.

 **Read the statement [here](#)**

NEWLY ADOPTED OPINIONS

[Civil Society's Role in Supporting Reform under the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova, as well as in Ukraine's Reform Path](#)

[The Role of the Private Sector and Civil Society in Strengthening Economic Cooperation within the Pact for the Mediterranean](#)

[Strengthening EU economic security](#)

STAY CONNECTED



Follow the ECMs on LinkedIn

The EESC's Enlargement Candidate Members now have their own [LinkedIn page](#). Follow them for updates on their work, first-hand perspectives and the latest developments.



Did you receive this newsletter from someone else?

Subscribe [here](#) to get future updates delivered straight to your inbox.



Explore past editions

Curious about what we've been up to?

[Browse our previous newsletters and discover our recent activities here.](#)