



European Economic  
and Social Committee

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# Diversity Europe Newsletter



**THE STATE OF ASSOCIATIONS AND  
ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE IN EUROPE**

# FOREWORD

**Séamus BOLAND (IE)**

*President, Diversity Europe Group*



In the space of a week, I have read several times of the **importance of the soul** as a means of understanding p r o f o u n d meaning. One

occasion was more trivial and the other more serious. In the trivial example, a film critic described the actor Daniel Craig as “giving soul” to the character of James Bond in the latest release. The second and more serious reference, came from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who in her State of the Union speech quoted Robert Schuman: “Europe needs a soul, an ideal and the political will to serve this ideal”. President von der Leyen was referring to the way in which the European Institutions and Member States have and are **working closely together** to address the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic crises and Climate Change.

In the same line of thinking, President von der Leyen could also have pointed to the thousands of **associations** which demonstrated their ability to reach out to communities that needed material or psychological assistance, at a time when being isolated at home was the norm. As the **EESC study The response of civil society organisations to face the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe**<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by the Diversity Europe Group, discovered earlier in the year: these organisations were often the bridge and the lifeline between individuals, families and public bodies. Many of these organisations are connected, either directly or indirectly to the EESC and with the Diversity Europe Group in particular.

Indeed, it is with a logic of **continuity** that our Group has approached the topic of associations and associational life in Europe during my mandate. Starting with

the **Group conference held on 12 March**, when we heard testimonies on the involvement of associations and NGOs, in ensuring that people could cope with the new circumstances of COVID-19. Moving on to our **extraordinary meeting**<sup>2</sup> planned for **5 November**, when we will look at the topic ‘Civil Society: Key Actors for the Future of Europe, Conference on the state of associations’. As we will discover at this event, one of the major concerns is that the social and civic value of this sector is often neglected and even called into question. In some countries, governments underestimate the value that these organisations bring to communities. Because of **this our Group, in partnership with Civil Society Europe**, will draw attention to these developments and provide a forum for reviewing the state of civil society organisations in Europe. Initial findings of a **new EESC study** on “The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space” will also be presented at this event.

The October EESC plenary will again provide the opportunity for the Diversity Europe Group to showcase these issues, with the adoption of an **Own-Initiative Information Report** entitled “Creation of a European statute for associations and NGOs incorporating a precise definition of an NGO or a European association”, for which our Member and Vice-President, Mr Vardakastanis is the rapporteur.

Finally, the **EESC Associational Life Category**, which is managed by our Group, continues its work. Most recently at its **meeting on 7 October**, when it explored how to improve youth participation in European and national policy making. The Category is fortunate to have the experience of Members belonging to national or EU-level associational life organisations, who represent foundations, associations, NGOs or other types of organisations interested in promoting the rule of law and free movement of people, as well as protecting civil liberties and human rights.

With all of the above, the Diversity Europe Group will continue to defend the role and rights of associations. Working closely together, for a more just, sustainable and democratic Europe!

Séamus Boland

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1. EESC study, <https://europa.eu/!xW38xR>

2. EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!UkGvfb>

# THE STATE OF ASSOCIATIONS AND ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE IN EUROPE

OP-ED

## Don't let lessons from the pandemic go to waste

**Raffaella BOLINI**  
Co-President, *European Civic Forum*<sup>1</sup>



Raffaella Bolini

We, humans, are vulnerable, the pandemic has taught us. We are running out of time, climate change shows us. We are on the wrong track, our growing inequalities tell us.

After decades of primacy of individualism, competition, profit and the free market, some concepts are reappearing in political discourse: responsibility, the role of public policies and services, and the common good. Austerity is no longer

the mantra; public investments to design a post-pandemic society are back on track.

It is not an easy task. The political class is used to only managing the present. The economic and financial powers that be are confident with their role in this new phase. Citizens have lost trust in the public sphere, to the great benefit of reactionaries. Inside communities, social ties have broken down.

In the past, we organisations of democratic civil society have often played the role of Cassandra: denouncing dangers without being heard. But we have not given up, acting on the fault lines of the many social and democratic fractures in our communities. We have developed practices and knowledge. When the pandemic required solidarity and proximity activism, we were there: it is our work, and we know how to do it.

Now we are here, ready to contribute to the post-crisis reconstruction, in full autonomy and independence. But are we really of interest to anyone? Only in some countries have civic organisations have been involved in shaping the recovery plan programmes. A certain institutional populism sees intermediate bodies as an obstacle to the direct relationship between leaders and voters. The civic space is under attack and in some countries we are victims of persecution and defamation.

We are trying to rise to the challenge: to take part in the debate on the Future of Europe, we have created the CSOs Convention<sup>2</sup>, a convergence space to help overcome our fragmentation and to present our common vision for Europe together. We have managed, albeit not without resistance, to be included as official actors in this institutional process.

But for years we have been fighting for Article 11 of the European Treaty<sup>3</sup> to be put into practice, and to have permanent bodies for real dialogue between European institutions and independent democratic civil society. We are still waiting. We have useful things to say and do, so that the great lessons of the pandemic are not wasted, so that there is no way back to our sick normality.



Geoff Livingston

1. European Civic Forum, <https://civic-forum.eu/>  
2. European Civic Forum, Civil Society Convention, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/civil-society-convention-on-the-future-of-europe/organisation-rules/>  
3. EUR-Lex, Consolidated version of the Treaty on EU, <https://europa.eu/!HunMVQ>

## NGOs building the well-being economy

**Vertti KIUKAS (FI)**

Secretary-General, SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health



Vertti Kiukas © SOSTE

A sustainable, democratic and pluralist Europe needs a strong civil society and an environment in which it can operate effectively. **Civil society organisations** play an important **dual role** in relation to government. On the one hand, they scrutinise policy decisions and give a voice in society to those who would not otherwise be heard. But at the same time they also ideally work as partners with central government, municipalities and regions, a collaboration that makes it possible to build a more socially sustainable society for everybody.

This dual role **requires a strong democracy and recognition** of civil society's importance, while civil society organisations must be **guaranteed the capacity**, including financial

capacity, to operate. Unfortunately this is **not yet being achieved everywhere** in Europe: the role of NGOs/associations may be limited to social commentary without them having any real influence on political decision-making, or to filling the gaps in social service provision. Worrying examples have also been seen of NGOs role in protecting human rights and their freedom of speech being restricted. In addition, limited finances can force NGOs into certain arrangements or direct their activities towards the agenda of the paymaster. All of this **threatens the self-determination and autonomy** of civil society: the activities of civil society organisations should always be based on the priorities and needs of citizens themselves. It is important for activities of NGOs to be transparent and legitimate, but at the same time also to ensure that public authorities do not influence their work by imposing unnecessary red tape or requirements.

NGOs also have the potential to **promote** the theory of the **well-being economy in Europe**. In order to rebuild society after the pandemic, a sense of community and trust must be restored and the well-being economy developed working together with other parts of society. The idea

of the well-being economy is to put people and their welfare at the centre of decision-making, and its vision is of a society that provides everybody with the means to live a good life. This requires investment in well-being. But people who are thriving create the basis for a sustainable economy. NGOs for their part can advocate policies that are geared to well-being and promote the concept of the well-being economy, including by highlighting the fact that their activities are essentially part of that economy.



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A Europe founded on the well-being economy concept of the future cannot be built solely on the basis of contracts, institutions, and the state. **We need decision-making systems**, at both national and European level, that in every case **hear and listen to general public and grassroots messages** about what living well means. Civil society organisations have a key role to play here.

## The association movement in Europe

**Ileana IZVERNICEANU DE LA IGLESIA (ES)**

Director for Communication and Institutional Relations and Spokesperson, Organisation of Consumers and Users (OCU)

The [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#)<sup>1</sup> guarantees the **right to freedom of assembly and association** in Europe. It is a fundamental pillar of democracy, which is at the heart of citizen representation. Political parties,

trade unions and social organisations form the fabric that gives it political and social expression. Dialogue with representatives of organised civil society is indispensable for the European institutions if they are to achieve their aim of developing a fully democratic and participatory European Union.

**Associations** play an essential role in **guiding public policies**. In the case of the consumer movement,



Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia

1. EUR-Lex, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, <https://europa.eu/!bRvTxU>



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for example, they have made a decisive contribution to creating and developing a consumer rights protection framework which is the most advanced in the world.

In order for associations to continue to play this key role, **their transparency**

**and independence** from various public and private authorities **need to be ensured**. One of the main risks is lack of independence and organised civil society structures being used in a biased and partisan way to benefit interests other than those they represent. A **European legislative framework** is therefore **needed** to secure the necessary transparency, along with sufficient, stable funding to enable these structures to operate and to do so independently.

However, across Europe, especially when it comes to social movements representing the public, subscription

and membership levels for the different organisations are low, threatening their effectiveness. Fragmentation is another chronic problem affecting various sectors, including consumer and neighbourhood associations.

The opportunities provided by **new technologies** must be harnessed to **rejuvenate the association movement** and make it strong and independent so that it can continue to make a decisive contribution to the integration and consolidation of the European Union. Together we are stronger!

## Will civil society emerge stronger from the coronavirus pandemic?

**Ronny LANNOO (BE)**

*General Adviser, UNIZO - Belgian Union of Self-Employed Entrepreneurs, SMEs and liberal professionals*

In my professional capacity, I was closely involved with two Belgian civil society organisations during the **coronavirus pandemic**. In our Group, I represent the Belgian organisation for SMEs and the liberal professions, with a particular focus on micro and small enterprises. At the same time, I work as a volunteer in the Belgian Network of Entrepreneurial Seniors.

Needless to say, **Belgian civil society organisations** also encountered **problems**. Overnight, they were cut off from their members, which had all sorts of consequences



Ronny Lannoo © EESC

for how they operated. At the same time, the **essential societal and socio-economic role** that civil society organisations can play in times of crisis was highlighted. Thanks to the increasing options offered by digital technologies, they also remained the voice of all those affected by the crisis in Belgium, especially vis-à-vis public authorities.

After some initial hesitation, the Belgian authorities fully grasped this. For the most part, the necessary societal and socio-economic measures were taken in **consultation** with civil society. This included strong financial support for self-employed workers and SMEs that were forced to close, thereby avoiding many bankruptcies and redundancies. This was also the case in the social and cultural sectors. For example, the local authority in my municipality developed vouchers that could be used by residents at local businesses. Local cultural associations and older people's associations also benefited from additional financial support, which helped better ensure their survival.

Finally, the **need for a stronger European Union** has now been clearly demonstrated, as no Member State has been able to face the crisis alone. Just take the vaccination strategy and the billions in support pooled under the European emergency fund. Because the virus does not stop at (internal) borders. Or take the opportunities a crisis presents. We need to seize these opportunities, together.



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# Not-for-profit associations need to be given proper consideration in EU policies and legislation

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**

Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group  
Vice-President, ECO section, EESC  
President, Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP)  
President, European Disability Forum (EDF)  
Treasurer, International Disability Alliance (IDA)  
Member, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)  
Member, Greek National Commission of Human Rights (EEDA)

As the EU institutions engage with citizens within the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>1</sup>, the EESC must seize the opportunity to take stock of the place of civil society organisations in the European Union.

It is common knowledge that the **civic space is shrinking**, affecting the ability of associations and NGOs to bring citizens together on issues of general interest, support and empower discriminated and excluded communities, play a watchdog role, and provide services on the ground.

Since the [Lisbon Treaty](#)<sup>2</sup> established the right to an open, transparent, and



Ioannis Vardakastanis © EESC

regular dialogue with civil society organisations, and the [European Charter of Fundamental Rights](#)<sup>3</sup> guaranteed the right to assembly and association, no practical steps have been taken to translate these rights into practice. There is much to learn from international organisations that have created a participatory status for European associations and NGOs.

To respond to societal challenges and contribute to policy-making at all levels, it is essential for associations to **meet, exchange and work together across borders**. Yet, associations face many **practical hurdles** if they want to set up branches in another country, transfer their headquarters, merge with others, employ staff or simply receive donations from individuals or companies from another country.

Furthermore, not-for-profit associations, which are neither companies nor public bodies, fail to be given proper consideration in EU policies and legislation.

It is time for the EU to develop an **overall strategy** aimed at giving **greater recognition** to the role of **civil society organisations** as the collective voice of citizens in a democratic European society. A **European Association Statute** would help to define a participatory status for associations as part of a structured civil dialogue at EU level with consistent guidelines and standards, and to introduce legal provisions to remove obstacles to cross-border activities including donations.

Ioannis Vardakastanis is rapporteur for the EESC information report [SOC/639](#)<sup>4</sup> on "Creation of a European statute for associations and NGOs incorporating a precise definition of an NGO or a European association". The report will be presented and put to the vote at the October plenary session.

## COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

### The systemic importance of professional organisations for European civil society

**Rudolf KOLBE (AT)**

Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group  
President, Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions  
President, Austrian Federal Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineers

The pandemic has clearly shown that ensuring that the **basic needs** of European citizens are met is extremely important, particularly in times of crisis. The **liberal professions** play a particularly **important role** in this



Rudolf Kolbe

– from the doctors providing medical care and engineers managing our technical infrastructure through to the tax advisers, lawyers, therapists and social workers dealing with the economic, legal and psychological consequences of the crisis.

1. Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://future.europa.eu/?locale=en>
2. EUR-Lex, Treaty of Lisbon, <https://europa.eu/CD8PTq>
3. European Commission, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, <https://europa.eu/!BF79Cb>
4. EESC information report SOC/639, <https://europa.eu/!v7FwNV>

The fact that the systemic importance of the professions became so clearly visible during the crisis has also greatly boosted the role of professional organisations. Medical associations across Europe have worked together with governments to develop strategies to manage the pandemic from a medical perspective, and to ensure access to quality medical services at all times. Other professional organisations have, for example, provided extensive know-how on implementing schemes to support entrepreneurs and workers during the crisis, as well as on adapting (technical) infrastructure.

All this has shown why it is so **important to recognise professional organisations** as equal social partners on a permanent basis, irrespective of crisis situations, and to give them, and the highly qualified professionals working across many different fields, a greater voice in society in the public interest.

Best **use** should be made of the **positive momentum** that has emerged in the last two years with regard to the positioning of professional organisations. As social partners, professional organisations can feed the **extensive expertise** of their members into social processes



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and help to improve them. They can ensure access to services that meet the basic needs of European citizens and help guarantee the high quality of these services, including in upcoming social development processes. We need to work to ensure that these valuable resources are actually used by governments.

## Sustainability of international trade remains a key driver for recovery

*Comment by Ionuț Sibian in view of the October plenary debate on “The future of EU trade policy in a changing global reality” with Jean-Marie Paugam, Deputy Director-General of the World Trade Organisation*

**Ionuț SIBIAN (RO)**

*Vice-President, REX section, EESC  
President, EU-Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, EESC  
Executive Director, Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC)  
Member of the Board of Directors, Orange Foundation*

2021 could be a **decisive year for international trade** in light of: the reform of the [WTO](#)<sup>1</sup>, aiming towards more sustainability and efficiency; the review of the EU trade policy; the early review of the 15-point action plan on Trade and Sustainable Development



Ionuț Sibian © EESC

(TSD) chapters; the appointment of the new EU Chief Trade Enforcement Officer and the introduction of fresh tools; the UK’s new status as a third country; and the change of administration in the US. All of this in what will hopefully be a post-COVID-19 recovery. **Expectations are high and the challenges manifold.** Members of the EESC **REX section** will make sure

to raise the views and concerns of civil society in all these areas. They will also work towards communicating better on international trade and its positive or negative impact on people and businesses.

**Sustainability** of international trade remains a **key driver** as we embark on a post-COVID-19 **recovery**. International trade must play its part to deliver on the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)<sup>2</sup>. The EESC thus maximises the reach of two recently adopted opinions (the design of a new multilateral matrix and sustainable supply chains and decent work in international trade). The Committee is also following the **WTO negotiations and reform**, participating as civil society advisor in the WTO Ministerial Conferences or organising workshops at WTO Public Forums.

Monitoring the implementation and enforcement of **trade agreements** by civil society remains a key focus area for the EESC, through its close monitoring of the EU trade negotiations currently under way at bilateral and regional level.



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1. World Trade Organisation (WTO), <https://www.wto.org/>

2. United Nations, SDGs, <https://sdgs.un.org/fr/goals>

# NEWS FROM THE DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP

During the preparatory meeting of the Diversity Europe Group before the September plenary session, the Group hold a debate on Climate Change with external speakers. The Members Lutz Ribbe (DE), Alain Coheur (BE) and Ioannis Vardakastanis (EL) reported

on the consequences of the natural disasters in their respective countries during the summer. Veronika Hunt Šafránková (Head of [UNEP](#)<sup>1</sup>, Brussels Office) and Niklas Hagelberg (UNEP, Climate Coordinator) presented the Sixth Assessment Report ([AR6 Climate](#)

[Change 2021](#)<sup>2</sup>) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)<sup>3</sup>) and commented on the state of play on commitments and climate action globally. Following the debate, the Group issued a statement on Climate Change:

## Delivering on the Urgency of Climate Change: nowhere left to hide



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**“It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Climate change is already affecting every inhabited region across the globe with human influence contributing to many observed changes in weather and climate extremes”<sup>4</sup>**

**Climate Change** is already upon us and there is **nowhere left to hide**. Regular severe floods, fires, droughts and hurricanes. This is what the world looks like at 1.1 to 1.3° Celsius warmer than when the steam engine was invented. Today, it is **impossible to ignore the impact of Climate Change** on our daily lives. Nor can we imagine its impact, even if we reach the goal of the [Paris Agreement](#)<sup>5</sup> to limit global warming to 1.5 ° Celsius. Our planet's future is very much under threat and there is no choice but to **urgently deliver on our common promises**.

**Cutting emissions**, even at faster rates, will not be enough. We must also **heavily invest in preparing emergency plans and in adapting**

**to the changing climate**. This will entail a **mental shift**: investing today and reaping the benefits in the next generation. But invest we must, with **increased sustainable financial resources**, backed up by strong commitments from public authorities, business, civil society and citizens. The [European Green Deal](#)<sup>6</sup> and the **‘Fit for 55’ package**<sup>7</sup> are both necessary and urgent. Moreover, the EU should take the global leadership on Climate Change, or risk losing its influence to other major economies. The latter must also demonstrate commitment, promoting climate neutrality with ambitious and concrete plans, before the [COP26 in Glasgow](#)<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, they should commit and deliver climate finance for mitigation and adaptation costs in the **least developed and vulnerable countries**.

Without doubt, the EU's ‘Fit for 55’ package will affect the lives of **every European citizen** and shape the **future role of European civil society**. Hence, it is imperative that the climate transition is also a **just transition** leaving nobody behind, informing, involving and assisting **vulnerable consumers and vulnerable citizens**. The new [EU Social Climate Fund](#)<sup>9</sup> to tackle energy poverty is a welcome step in this direction. Incentives for consumers to renovate smartly and sustainably must also be delivered, in tandem with strategies such as the [EC's Renovation Wave](#)<sup>10</sup>.

However, without doubt, **civil society organisations** want to be and must be allowed to be at the **centre of this entire process**. Whether it is environmental, farmer, consumer, youth, the liberal professions or social organisations, every socio-economic sector of civil society must be empowered to lead, design and implement the climate transition. Civil society organisations can also promote **new economic models**, such as the social economy, which have proven very useful in addressing previous socio-economic challenges. It is essential for civil society organisations to establish **viable alliances and work constructively together**. The [Biodiversity Strategy](#)<sup>11</sup> and the [CAP's Sustainable land use \(greening\)](#)<sup>12</sup>, both share the overall objectives of the European

1. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), <https://www.unep.org/>

2. IPCC, AR6 Climate Change 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>

3. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

4. IPCC, AR6 Climate Change 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>

5. United Nations, Paris Agreement, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

6. European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!Tr74bn>

7. European Commission, PR on Fit for 55 package, <https://europa.eu/!ckCGp>

8. United Nations Climate Change Conference in UK, <https://ukcop26.org/>

9. European Commission, Social Climate Fund, <https://europa.eu/!cqUGbC>

10. European Commission, Renovation Wave, <https://europa.eu/!Ck66PT>

11. European Commission, Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, <https://europa.eu/!Hw37Bu>

12. European Commission, Sustainable Land Use, <https://europa.eu/!xt94nf>



Green Deal. Success in each sector is dependent on mutual delivery. The **EESC**, representing European civil society organisations and notably the **Diversity Europe Group**, must also fully play their role in mitigating this human-induced calamity. Putting pressure on **European Institutions** and acting as a conscience against impending calamity for our Planet and humankind. Promoting innovative solutions such as **mobile emergency European assistance**, able to intervene immediately in cases of natural disasters in EU Member States.

Crucially, it is **civil society** which has the ambition and creativity to imagine this **sustainable, resilient and fairer world**. It is civil society which has a pivotal role in **driving and maintaining the momentum** on climate mitigation and adaptation among communities and citizens. It is these same actors who will have the tenacity to **invest in, accelerate and embrace change with bottom-up initiatives** which respect the opinions and the rights of local people.

Ultimately, we can only embark on this new world by **changing perceptions and attitudes**, by anchoring climate mitigation and adaptation firmly within our **European values and identity**. **Delivering on Climate Change** must become a **positive European narrative**. A narrative which embraces and finds the balance between environmental sustainability, prosperity, innovation, social inclusion and democratic participation.

## The EESC Consumer and Environment Category marks its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and discusses the way forward

The **EESC Consumers and Environment Category**<sup>1</sup> has made significant contributions to the protection of consumer rights and the environment in Europe. It has championed topics such as the regulation of consumer over-indebtedness, planned obsolescence and the circular economy. Fair and just climate mitigation and adaptation must take centre stage of the Category's activities in the future as consumers and citizens will be key actors in the green transition. The new **EU Social Climate Fund**<sup>2</sup> to tackle energy poverty and joining forces of all actors are key for achieving a sustainable, resilient and fairer Europe. These are some of the main messages of the conference '30 years defending European consumers', held by the Category to mark its 30th anniversary and in the context of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**<sup>3</sup>. The event on 1 October saw topical debates and the participation of high-profile speakers.

Opening the conference, EESC Diversity Europe Group president **Séamus Boland** highlighted the progress that has been made in consumer protection over the last three decades and reinforced that consumer interests and environmental protection must be defended in every village, rural area and small urban town. In this context, **Mr Boland** complemented the Category's



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work: "The Category has contributed to securing common EU legislation to regulate consumer over-indebtedness. We should be proud that it has focused on the sharing economy, collaborative consumption and the fight against planned obsolescence, embracing a more holistic perspective of the circular economy." The Group president also stressed the key role played by consumers and civil society actors in delivering a sustainable, resilient and fairer world.

The **first panel** of the hybrid event explored economic aspects and the role of the various European institutions in achieving the radical rethinking of consumption, essential to mitigate climate change.

With regard to household consumption in Europe, **François Letondu** from Société Générale observed: "There

are major changes in typologies and purchasing methods, but profound differences between consumers."

**Marie-Paule Benassi** from the European Commission recalled the Commission's various initiatives to strengthen consumer rights of the last 50 years and explained that the **New Consumer Agenda**<sup>4</sup> will set its ambitions for the next level of markets: more digital and green.

**MEP Pascal Durand** praised the Consumer and Environment Category's work, especially with regard to planned obsolescence,

1. EESC Consumers and Environment Category, <https://europa.eu/Inf36rW>

2. European Commission, Social Climate Fund, <https://europa.eu/!cqUGbC>

3. Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>

4. European Commission, PR on New Consumer Agenda, <https://europa.eu/!wv34DC>

and explained that the European Parliament has been able to increase its impact by achieving a broad cross-party consensus on protecting consumers and the environment. "We will keep working to support new EU-level powers and policies so as to respond better to consumer needs."

New challenges for consumers and the environment were the topic of the **second panel**. Participants discussed social aspects, digital and climate challenges and possible forms of consumption after COVID-19.

**Jean-Daniel Lévy** from Harris Interactive analysed the development of consumption in Europe. "Over the past 30 years, Europeans have become more and more environment-conscious and have been getting into the habit of doing things online, though without that undermining physical purchasing."

**Monique Goyens** from the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) said: "The EESC's longstanding mission to promote consumers becomes even more crucial in current times with global and digitalised markets". Concerning the green transition, Ms Goyens added: "The EU will succeed to address these challenges only if people, in particular the most vulnerable ones, are centre to its policies."

The two spokespersons of the Consumers and Environment Category concluded the debates and gave an outlook on the future work of the Category.

**Thierry Libaert** said: "Environmental protection and consumer protection are closely entwined. Our action to combat planned obsolescence will reduce flows of waste and raw materials, while making repairable and sustainable products available to consumers. It is important to

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the EESC Consumers and Environment Category, the Committee published a brochure on the Category's achievements. It is available in English and French at: <https://europa.eu/!ftkFFP>

always make the connection between consumer issues and the environment."

**Bernardo Hernández Bataller** added: "In the future, the Category will not only concentrate its work on the promotion of the circular economy, but also on climate change, doing everything possible so that the advertising messages are truthful, and the marketing techniques are not misleading". He also called for a policy that pursued a high level of protection for consumers and the environment, arguing that consumers increasingly focused on the sustainability of goods and products.

## Associational Life Category discusses improving EU public consultation instruments and promoting models of youth participation



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On 7 October, the EESC's [Associational Life Category](#)<sup>1</sup> held its third meeting of the year. The session was divided into two parts. First, Members discussed EU public consultation instruments and the European Year of Youth 2022. Then, models of youth participation and ideas for youth involvement in the EESC were debated.

**Gabriella Civico**, Director of the [European Volunteer Centre](#)<sup>2</sup>, opened the first panel by highlighting the need to identify shortcomings in the civil society consultation process. **Antonina Cipollone**, Head of Unit in the General Secretariat of the European

Commission, suggested improving the visibility of the consultation process. **Brikena Xhomaqi**, co-chair of the [EESC's Liaison Group](#)<sup>3</sup>, highlighted low participation in public consultations, indicating that they should be made more accessible. **Carlotta Besozzi**, Coordinator of [Civil Society Europe](#)<sup>4</sup>, recommended consulting citizens on broader issues, rather than just on niche topics.

**Biliana Sirakova**, EU Youth Coordinator at the European Commission, and **Simon Lindkær Andersen**, Board Member of the [European Youth Forum](#)<sup>5</sup>, informed Members about the European Year of Youth. Both speakers recognised that young people were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and therefore needed to be included and supported in the decision-making process. **Andris Gobiņš**, spokesperson for the Category, urged participants not to allow the European Year to be just a "photo opportunity".

The afternoon session saw EU youth organisation representatives share their models of best practice and their recommendations for a more inclusive youth voice in politics.

The final panel, chaired by Diversity Europe Group Member **Michael Mc Loughlin**, discussed the way forward for the EESC. All panellists agreed that informal meetings with young people were needed to involve them in the EESC's work. **Cillian Lohan**, Vice President of the EESC, and **Peter Schmidt**, President of the EESC's [NAT section](#)<sup>6</sup>, suggested involving young people as experts in future EESC opinions and allowing their contributions to be heard across the whole of the EESC.

1. EESC, Associational Life Category, <https://europa.eu/!VD38XB>

2. European Volunteer Centre, <https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/>

3. EESC, Liaison Group, <https://europa.eu/!bcxqtY>

4. Civil Society Europe, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/>

5. European Youth Forum, <https://www.youthforum.org/>

6. EESC NAT section, <https://europa.eu/!yq33Bv>

# MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

## Joël Destom and the association Sciences Ô join forces

**Joël DESTOM (FR)**

Director-general, MIAG  
(interprofessional mutual society  
covering the Antilles-Guyane region)  
Overseas director, AG2R La Mondiale  
mutual society

On 1 October 2021, the student association [Sciences Ô](#)<sup>1</sup> selected **Joël Destom**, a Member of the Diversity Europe Group, as its **patron for the year 2021-2022**. The association's aim is to promote the overseas territories within the research university [Sciences Po Paris](#)<sup>2</sup> and to facilitate the integration of students from these areas at the university and on the labour market. Year after year, choosing a "patron" gives it the means to raise its profile and to access a new circle of contacts and new career building opportunities.

"I have accepted this appointment



Joël Destom

with enthusiasm and I am delighted and honoured to be invited to take part in the Sciences Ô adventure. I am at the association's service; I will share my experience, knowledge, my book of contacts and my ideas with them. I know I will also learn a lot: about their projects, their views on our regions, their way of seeing the world and their perception of the future... I am very proud of this!" said **Joël Destom** following his appointment.

For Sciences Ô, Mr Destom's involvement in the European Economic and Social Committee's activities was a

decisive factor. The conclusions of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>3</sup> will be delivered under the French Presidency. Members of the Sciences Ô association, who are young students, want to seize this opportunity to actively raise awareness of all aspects of Europe among young people from the overseas territories: its history, its institutions, its democratic values based on the rule of law, the challenges of its construction, its linguistic richness, its cultural diversity and its unique assets in the outermost regions.

**Mr Destom** explained, "the association intends to take advantage of this patronage to celebrate Europe and its values, both on the European continent and in all overseas territories. I will do my best to support them".

## Young people in their home towns making their voices heard in Europe

**Katrina LEITĀNE (LA)**

Representative, Latvian National Youth Council

On 18 September 2021, our EESC Diversity Europe Group Member **Katrina Leitāne** took part in a **regional Youth Forum** to discuss with young people the mechanisms and routes for getting involved in policy-making in the EU and how to make their voices heard at the European Union level. She also talked to them about the role of youth organisations in policy-making at different levels. This was an outreach activity organised by our Member, the local youth centre, and the [Latvian National Youth Council](#)<sup>4</sup> in the context of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>5</sup>. The **aim** of the Forum was to **raise awareness about active**



Group photo regional Youth Forum

**participation** at local, national and EU level, and to develop proposals in fields like youth employment, social inclusion, education and training, health, and participation.

Proposals developed for the local level will be incorporated into the local youth policy planning document; proposals relevant to the national level will be submitted to

the National Youth Council of Latvia for further consideration and taken as recommendations in further discussions with policy-makers.

1. Sciences Ô, <https://scienceso.com/>
2. Sciences Po Paris, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/en>
3. Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>
4. Latvian National Youth Council, <https://ljp.lv/national-youth-council-latvia>
5. Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>

Together with **MEP Dace Melbārde**, Ms Leitāne discussed with young people potential proposals to be uploaded to the Conference's Multilingual Digital Platform. **Ms Leitāne** highlighted that involving young people in policy-making has to be meaningful and targeted, and said that she saw the **Conference** as an **opportunity** to have an impact on matters that may directly affect young people. She described it as crucial to encourage debates with young people about the future of the EU, and highlighted the **importance of making participation accessible** to everyone regardless of their location. In Ms Leitāne's view, the Conference must listen to young people in big cities as well as in



villages, because every voice matters and even a small place can make a big difference.

**Ms Leitāne** also participated in the [EU Youth Conference](#)<sup>1</sup> under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU which took place digitally from Maribor, Slovenia, from 26 September to 30 September 2021. This conference was the final conference of the 8th Cycle of [EU Youth Dialogue](#)<sup>2</sup> with the topic of the 9th EU Youth Goal **"Space**

**and participation for all"**, and discussed how best to implement Youth Goals in practice on different levels (local, national, regional and European). Some of the results will be linked to the Conference on the Future of Europe processes and the Conference will feed into the EU Youth Dialogue Council Conclusions adopted by the Council of Ministers in November 2021.

**Ms Leitāne** emphasises the importance of the targeted and meaningful involvement of young people on different levels and believes that the Conference on the Future of Europe can contribute to this process.

## Javier Garat Pérez draws Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius's attention to the needs of the fisheries sector

**Javier GARAT PÉREZ (ES)**  
Secretary-General, Spanish Fishing Confederation CEPESCA  
President, *Europêche*



Javier Garat Pérez (2nd from left) and Virginijus Sinkevičius (right)  
© Javier Garat Pérez

On 20 and 21 September, our Member **Javier Garat Pérez**, representing the Spanish and European fisheries sector, attended meetings organised in Vigo, Alicante and Santa Pola by the European Commission and the Spanish government on the occasion of **Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius's first visit** to the EU Member State. The Commissioner had meetings with various organisations

from the sector and visited Santa Pola's fishing port and fish market.

In his speech, **Mr Garat Pérez** thanked the Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries for his visit as he considered it very important to bring the European institutions, especially the European Commission, closer to fishing ports so that they could learn more about the **realities of the fisheries sector** and how those working in the sector felt.

Mr Garat Pérez stressed the need to listen to the sectors' workers during European legislative processes and conveyed the frustration they felt at the **lack of recognition of their efforts to achieve sustainability** in the European fisheries sector. Thanks to the sacrifices of the last ten years, during which many companies, workers and vessels have been lost with negative consequences for fishing communities in regions that are highly

dependent on fishing, more than 99% of landings of stocks managed by the EU in the north-east Atlantic were fished sustainably, which has reduced fishing pressure by 50% and increased fish biomass by 50% since 2010.

Furthermore, the Diversity Europe Group Member asked the Commissioner to carefully **assess the potential consequences** of the [European Green Deal](#)<sup>3</sup> and the [Biodiversity Strategy for 2030](#)<sup>4</sup> in terms of loss of competitiveness of European companies, calling for a level playing field with competitors from third countries. With regard to the Mediterranean, he expressed the sector's commitment to reversing the stock situation.

1. Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU, EU Youth Conference, <https://www.youth-slovenia2021.eu/enter>

2. European Commission, EU Youth Dialogue, [https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/euyouthdialogue\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/euyouthdialogue_en)

3. European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!Tr74bn>

4. European Commission, Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, <https://europa.eu/!Hw37Bu>

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

## Members reaffirm their commitment to media freedom, media pluralism, and journalist protection

Challenges for the European media and journalists have increased in recent years. Threats of disinformation, journalist attacks and fake news are on the rise. “**Securing Media Freedom and Diversity in Europe**” was the topic of debate at the latest EESC plenary session. Members were joined by experts **Ricardo Gutiérrez**, Secretary-General of the European Federation of Journalists and **Julie Majerczak**, Head of the Brussels Office of Reporters without Borders.

The EESC president, **Christa Schweng**, declared that the freedom and diversity of the **media** were **essential to democracy** and referred to the European Media Freedom Act that the European Commission is currently preparing<sup>1</sup>. This Act would give the Commission legal tools to enforce media freedom and pluralism in the single market.

**Ricardo Gutiérrez** declared that media freedom was shrinking and argued that Member States were too passive regarding unsafe working conditions for journalists. He stressed the importance of having independent editorial boards to uphold the ethical standards of the media. This responsibility should not lie with national governments or online platforms. **Julie Majerczak** feared



Julie Majerczak © EESC

that “the impunity often enjoyed by those who have ordered or carried out murders results in giving a carte blanche to those who want to stifle critical voices”. She supported the EESC’s own-initiative opinion [SOC/635](#)<sup>2</sup>, which was presented in the ensuing debate, and urged the EU to condemn attacks and equip itself with appropriate tools to uphold media pluralism and freedom.



Christian Moos © EESC

Rapporteur and Diversity Europe Group Member **Christian Moos** called for urgent action to be taken to stop journalists being “threatened, put under pressure, intimidated or even killed”, as these attacks are threatening liberal democracy in various European countries. **Jan Dirx**, vice-president of



Elena-Alexandra Calistru © EESC

the Diversity Europe Group, warned that “polarisation by politicians of the far right” is a contributing factor to these attacks. He stressed the importance of actively defending the rule of law.

Two other Members of the Diversity Europe Group took the floor to share their views. **Elena-Alexandra Calistru** highlighted violent attacks on Romanian journalists covering stories of illegal deforestation. She stressed that the “EU must fight harder to strengthen the space for media freedom”. **Ágnes Cser** stated that “European citizens [should] have the right to [a] public broadcaster in all official EU languages”.

**Ms Schweng** concluded by highlighting that the EESC was committed to tackling the many challenges facing the media. Quality journalism needs to be better supported and **media freedom must remain at the top of the agenda**, amongst other things.

The full debate can be watched here: <https://fb.watch/8vNGjXiHvS/>

## Commissioner Ferreira: Social fairness and inclusivity need to be at the centre of our recovery

Cohesion policy was the topic of an **EESC plenary debate** in September with **Elisa Ferreira**, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms. The debate was linked to information report [ECO/547 ‘Evaluation of the implementation of e-Cohesion in Programmes financed by ERDF and](#)

[Cohesion Fund 2014-2020](#)<sup>3</sup>, for which Diversity Europe Group member Elena-Alexandra Calistru was the rapporteur, and own-initiative opinion [ECO/550 ‘The role of cohesion policy in combatting inequalities in the new programming period after the COVID-19 crisis](#)<sup>4</sup>, for which the vice-

president of the Diversity Europe Group, Ioannis Vardakastanis, was the rapporteur. Participants agreed that

1. With regard to the European Media Freedom Act, see <https://europa.eu/!Fw47kp>  
2. EESC opinion SOC/635, <https://europa.eu/!QM38xp>  
3. EESC information report ECO/547, <https://europa.eu/!wdchxV>  
4. EESC opinion ECO/550, <https://europa.eu/!knuf4W>



Elisa Ferreira © EESC

the recovery must address the socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and that cohesion policy would be key in that context.

In her opening address, **Ms Ferreira** said, "Our Union is as strong as its weakest link. To fight back and reduce inequalities is a *sine qua non* for a strong and thriving Union. Social fairness and inclusivity need to be at the centre of our recovery".

Presenting information report ECO/547 to the plenary, **Elena-Alexandra Calistru** said: "Our assessment of e-cohesion systems shows that it is now more important than ever to ensure digital tools and transparency of the data related to the use of all types of EU funds". This would enhance the structural participation of

civil society organisations and other stakeholders in the programming and implementation of EU policies.

ECO/550 rapporteur **Ioannis Vardakastanis** voiced some concerns, including in relation to the lack of coherence observed between cohesion policy and the temporary recovery instrument [NextGenerationEU](#)<sup>1</sup>: "Whereas the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#)<sup>2</sup>'s size should allow it to reduce inequalities in the EU, the speed of its development and the lack of strict spending criteria puts us at risk of undermining recent advances and quality investments using cohesion funds."

In the general debate, Diversity Europe Group president **Séamus Boland** pointed out that future cohesion policy would have to include four elements: defining the societies that we wanted, a holistic and complementary policy approach, determining our own red lines between European values and EU funding and the opportunity to forge a European identity around cohesion and solidarity among Member States.

Diversity Europe Group members Justyna Kalina Ochędzan and Michael Mc Loughlin also took the floor during the debate. **Ms Ochędzan** urged: "We have to remember new forms of exclusion and divergence – technological and provoked by climate change." **Mr Mc Loughlin** said: "In focusing the cohesion policy and the Recovery and Resilience Fund on inequality we need to focus on young people who were hardest hit by COVID-19 in their education, employment and mental health."



Séamus Boland © EESC

The full debate can be viewed at: <https://fb.watch/8vNHuE1xyq/>

1. European Commission, NextGenerationEU, <https://europa.eu/bm69mtV>
2. European Commission, Recovery and Resilience Facility, <https://europa.eu/ljt78Jr>

## OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place from 22 and 23 September, in a hybrid format. The EESC plenary adopted 23 opinions and information reports, 9 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

**Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY)**, rapporteur, [NAT/816](#)<sup>1</sup> Strategic Guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture

**Andreas THURNER (AT)**, rapporteur, [NAT/818](#)<sup>2</sup> Action Plan for the development of EU organic production

**Branko RAVNIK (SI)**, rapporteur, [NAT/823](#)<sup>3</sup> Towards a Fair Food Supply Chain

**Christian Moos (DE)**, rapporteur, [SOC/635](#)<sup>4</sup> Securing media freedom and diversity in Europe

**Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO)**, rapporteur, [ECO/547](#)<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the implementation of e-Cohesion in Programmes financed by ERDF and Cohesion Fund 2014-2020

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**, rapporteur, [ECO/550](#)<sup>6</sup> Cohesion policy in combatting inequalities

**Marina Elvira CALDERONE (IT)**, rapporteur, [SOC/699](#)<sup>7</sup> Guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States

**Martin BÖHME (DE)**, rapporteur, [INT/952](#)<sup>8</sup> Machinery

**Simo TIAINEN (FI)**, rapporteur, [NAT/817](#)<sup>9</sup> New approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU

1. EESC opinion NAT/816, <https://europa.eu/lHVc76u>
2. EESC opinion NAT/818, <https://europa.eu/lKkVdhQ>
3. EESC opinion NAT/823, <https://europa.eu/lbRxxXc>
4. EESC opinion SOC/635, <https://europa.eu/lQM38xp>

5. EESC information report ECO/547, <https://europa.eu/lwdchxV>
6. EESC opinion ECO/550, <https://europa.eu/lknuf4W>
7. EESC opinion SOC/699, <https://europa.eu/lFRQTKy>

8. EESC opinion INT/952, <https://europa.eu/lf7vMJy>
9. EESC opinion NAT/817, <https://europa.eu/lCM37gX>

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's [website](#)<sup>1</sup>.

The **next EESC plenary session** will take place on **8 and 9 December**. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our [website](#)<sup>2</sup>.

A list including all **new work appointments** of Diversity Europe Group Members is available on the Committee's [website](#)<sup>3</sup>.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EESC OPINION SOC/677? An interview on the opinion “Europe’s beating cancer plan” with rapporteur Małgorzata Anna Bogusz.

**Małgorzata Anna BOGUSZ (PL)**  
*President, The Kulski Foundation for Polish – American Relations*

**Ms Bogusz, your opinion – SOC/677 – was adopted at the EESC plenary in June 2021. What are the three main findings of this opinion?**

A real tsunami of cancer is sweeping through Europe and the world. We are witnessing a steadily increasing number of cancer cases. With this in mind, we must begin to take action now. There is no time to lose. We must jointly work on improving diagnosis, therapy, treatment and prevention. That is why we make it clear in the opinion: a concrete action scenario is required to implement the [Cancer Action Plan](#)<sup>4</sup>. It must be accompanied by specific performance indicators and clear timelines.

**How could these issues be addressed? What are your three main recommendations/proposals?**

As we emphasised in the opinion, Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, as proposed by the European Commission, is still too general. The European Union must begin to set itself even more ambitious and specific goals in the fight against cancer.

One of the toughest challenges



*Małgorzata Anna Bogusz*

is to reduce the discrepancies in access to cancer treatment between individual countries. For some types of cancer, differences in survival rates are really dramatic. Therefore, we want to expand the possibilities for cancer patients to benefit from high-quality treatment provided by other Member States.

Support is also needed for research into innovative methods to fight against cancer. The beneficiaries of such support should include not only state institutions, but also companies of various sizes, as well as scientists.

We must likewise assist with, and contribute to, the development of international cooperation - exchanges of knowledge, know-how and experience, and the promotion of good practice - both within the EU, as well as, for example, with the United States and Canada, where 5-year survival rates are the highest. There are

loads of things to do and to work on.

**Since the opinion was adopted, what have you done to promote it and to ensure civil society’s views are heard?**

I try to use every single opportunity to talk about the opinion and its conclusions, as well as about Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan as such. I raise this topic in almost every possible public speech. On every occasion, we must clearly stress that the fight against cancer should, to a much larger extent than before, become the subject of collaboration and co-financing by EU countries.

**What are the next steps?**

For Europeans, no matter where they live, a cancer diagnosis should not mean a death sentence. We need a real Marshall Plan in the field of oncology! The Union can definitely afford such a plan. It should especially cover children and teenagers. The EU must allocate more resources to better treat the youngest cancer patients. Access to the most innovative therapies and the introduction of vaccination campaigns enabling us to reduce the number of cancers caused by viral infections both have a unique role to play here.

Find out more about the EESC opinion SOC/677 at: <https://europa.eu/!nD84Ft>

1. EESC, opinions, <https://europa.eu/!wF86wY>

2. EESC, plenary sessions, <https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG>

3. EESC, New work appointments – September 2021,

<https://europa.eu/!yJFkqx>

4. European Commission, PR on Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, <https://europa.eu/!wy38HR>

# UPCOMING EVENTS

**27/10/2021** – Meeting of the Social Economy Category

**28/10/2021** – Meeting of the Farmers' Category

**05/11/2021** – Conference on *Civil Society Organisations: Key actors for the Future of Europe*

**29/11/2021** – Extraordinary meeting of the Group



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**External participants can register for remote participation until 26 October 2021 (12.00 noon) at: <https://europa.eu/!UkGvfb>**

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