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OFFICE 25

Oliver Röpke
President of the EESC



European Economic
and Social Committee

President Röpke speech at the 155th Committee of the Regions' Plenary sitting

*Dear President Cordeiro,
Members of the Committee of the Regions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

- I would like to thank President Cordeiro for the invitation to join you today. It is an enormous honour and pleasure for me to have the opportunity, only 4 weeks after taking office at the EESC, to speak to you and to explain my priorities as the newly elected President of EESC. I would also like to discuss the synergies in the work that is done by our two Committees.
- It is not the easiest task to speak after the intervention of President Zelensky. I can just congratulate you again on the strong cooperation and support for Ukraine. I can assure you that we have exactly the same position in the EESC. We also adopted a resolution very early in favour of granting the candidate status to Ukraine. Only yesterday, I had a pleasure to meet trade unionists from Ukraine, in Berlin, and the week before a delegation of employers, here in Brussels, and I can just express my greatest respect for the fight of the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian civil society, which is a lively civil society even under the martial law. This shows that Ukraine is committed to our values and that we should everything we can to pave the way for Ukraine to join our European family.
- Dear President, I wanted to first acknowledge that it has only been a year since you last addressed our committee plenary, and I must express my deep admiration for the remarkable work you have accomplished as the leader of your Committee, within such a short timeframe. Your achievements serve as a true inspiration for my own term of office!
- Now, allow me to begin by a reminder of who we are. Our two Committees are essential blocks of the European project. We represent the beating heart of Europe – its citizens. It is thanks to our work that the civil society, the local and regional authorities can speak up. Have their voices heard in the EU. It is more important than ever that those voices are united, loud and clear.
- Let me assure you, dear President Cordeiro, that on the side of the EESC we look at the Committee of the Regions as our sister institution. I command your unwavering dedication in the battle to bring the EU closer to the citizens who recognise themselves in their local or regional politicians. On our side, we share this commitment and will extend it to those who commit their time and efforts to the full range of civil society organisations. For that reason, we hope that we can join forces and make our cooperation stronger and meaningful.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- We have a firm legal framework for efficient and effective cooperation between the two Committees which will help us to achieve our common goals. We share our building, logistics, but fortunately, this not the only thing we share.
- Allow me to present a number of important priorities which are part of my presidency programme and resonate strongly with yours. Stand up for democracy, speak up for Europe! This is the motto of my presidency.
- The first leg of my manifesto, my political programme, is about standing up for democracy at home by:
 - o promoting fundamental values and the rule of law;
 - o bringing citizens closer to the EESC;
 - o supporting representative and direct democracy, as well as;
 - o ensuring the EESC's contribution to the success of the 2024 European elections.
- Since its creation, our Committee has been a pillar of participative democracy. We provide a platform for citizens and stakeholders to raise their voice in the EU decision-making process. We all remember that participatory and deliberative democracy were discussed largely during the Conference on the Future of Europe, and citizens expressed their wish to have structural influence on the EU's Annual Work Programme and Policy Priorities.
- The role of civil society in keeping a well operating democracy is absolutely essential. Participatory democracy is not only complimentary to representative democracy, but a constitutive element of it.
- You advocate for a stronger democracy with more transparency that is also based on promoting greater and systematic citizen participation in the decision-making processes.
- Citizen participation is an issue on which we should provide synergies. Both our Committees are tasked with advising the EU institutions and improving EU decision making. We do this by contributing with our points of view and we work strongly together. I am absolutely willing to continue the strong cooperation. The implementation of the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe is key to do that.
- My second priority - Standing Up for democracy abroad, is about setting up a true Civil Society Gateway to democracy and prosperity for neighbours and partners in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries. I know how close to your heart is the support for Ukraine's freedom and European future. You have shown this just last month with your visit to Ukrainian cities and villages.
- By acting as a Civil Society Gateway for these countries, the EESC will aim to empower civil society organisations to fight for freedom, democracy, and closer integration. My aim is for us as EESC to work very closely with representatives from the civil society in candidate countries and to involve them even stronger in our daily work, including in our advisory work.
- Just yesterday, when I met colleagues not only from Ukraine but also the Western Balkans and Moldova I could see that they are waiting for this. We cannot afford to grant candidate status to those countries and then let them be alone in the waiting room. We need to be proactive. Our role is to empower and strengthen civil society structures in the candidate countries. This is the key priority of my presidency.
- It is crucial for the EU to promote and uphold the values enshrined in the EU Treaties, at home but also abroad. The EESC will use its network of civil society contacts to reinforce its value-based diplomacy, encompassing areas such as climate change, culture, social and economic affairs on a global stage.



- My third priority is to Speak Up for Europe by making the EESC more representative, involving new generations and underrepresented members of the society in the EESC's work.
- I know that our committees share the belief that today's decisions are made to build a strong and just future for the generations to come – and that it can only be done by truly involving young people.
- Dear President Cordeiro, I know your personal dedication and the commitment of your committee on this topic – the support you give to young politicians, the creation of the Charter on Youth and Democracy – and we should join forces to allow young people to raise their needs and concerns because I believe that our committees are best placed to provide youth-friendly democratic spaces.
- Therefore, I also propose to strongly involve younger people in our Committee; to set up dedicated Young EESC Group; and to implement the "Youth Test" in our opinions in a very systematic way.
- We share a lot of priorities in our Committees, and I would add to fairer Europe, a stronger Social Europe, with attention to sustainable growth, jobs, social inequality and poverty, in line with the Porto Social Summit commitment. In this context, the EESC will support the implementation of a Green and Social Deal; the Sustainable Development Goals; and the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- By the way, our two Committees were among the first institutions that issued clear opinions on the Minimum Wage Directive, this shows our both Committees can be active at the very early stage and can influence the decision-making process.
- Dear President Cordeiro, our visit to the Porto Social Forum later this week (26 and 27 May) will be a timely opportunity to discuss joint initiatives. It would also be an opportunity to debate on responses to the EU's major structural challenges and their impact on the social dimension and progress with cohesion.
- Then, a stronger cohesion policy, which I know is very close to your heart, must play a central role in ensuring a balanced recovery to sustained growth, fostering convergence, combating social exclusion and making sure that no one is left behind. The EESC will continue to insist that cohesion should help to advance policies in relation to digitalisation and accessibility of services, reindustrialisation, SMEs and broadband services in the regions.
- The EESC will continue to make proposals for a cohesion policy that corresponds to the real needs of EU citizens and satisfies the long-term goals of convergence among EU regions.
- Another point I wanted to mention, I had a look today at one of the headlines of Politico which said "Water War: why drought is getting political". It shows that this issue of climate change and drought is an emerging issue. On our end, the EESC has chosen the Blue Deal as a cross-sectoral approach for 2023, recognising the increasing scarcity of fresh water resources and the challenges posed by climate change and human activity.
- We advocate for a change of scale in European water policies and are examining water challenges from various perspectives, including industries, agriculture, infrastructures, financing, water poverty, consumers, and blue diplomacy. We will organise a conference under the Spanish EU Presidency on October 26 to call for the adoption of an EU Blue Deal under the next European Commission.
- Allow me finally to come back to the Conference on the Future of Europe.
- It was an excellent opportunity for the representatives of both Committees to work closely during its plenary session and working group.



- We believe that there is a lot to deliver on, as a result of the Conference proposals: very concrete steps can be taken to reinforce citizens' participation and youth involvement in the EU decision making. For instance, we propose the introduction of an EU Youth Test to bring a youth perspective in legislation.
- Moreover, the EESC is working to underpin an existing powerful tool, the European Citizens' Initiative Day. The 2023 edition of the European Citizens' Initiative Day will take place on 8 June and will focus on the skills that organisers need to make their initiative a success. I would like to take the opportunity to extend the invitation to you President to participate in this important conference as it would substantially increase its political impact.
- The new EESC mandate will pave the way to one of the cornerstones of the European democracy: the European Parliament elections. The elections will mark a crucial democratic moment, with major European issues high on the agenda such as the European Green Deal, the rise of extremism and populism or the rule of law.
- As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will ensure a robust participation of our Committee, together with civil society partners, in inter-institutional activities and campaigns to increase voter participation ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections.
- I believe that this is another opportunity for our committees to join forces because I believe we share the same values and the same goals.
- Dear President Cordeiro, dear Vasco. In conclusion, it is with great enthusiasm that I affirm our shared values and common challenges. I am convinced that our collaboration will lead us to discover innovative solutions that can truly make a significant impact. By standing together, side by side, I am delighted to embark on this journey alongside you. Together, we have the means to create a lasting difference.
- Once again thank you for this important opportunity for me to explain my priorities for this two and a half years mandate. I can ensure you that close cooperation with you is a cornerstone of my policy priorities. I look forward to the next two and a half years to be working with all of you.

