Dear reader,

This year has been tragically marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The EU stands in solidarity with the attacked country and will continue to do so. This is why the EU has approved unprecedented sanctions against the aggressor and decided to stop our dependency on Russian fuels. All of this comes at a price for European citizens, who in their great majority understand the need to counter this attempt to impose the law of the strongest. However, leveraging on high energy bills and economic uncertainty, the Russian propaganda and disinformation machine is trying to create doubts in European public opinion about who is responsible for the conflict, the authenticity of Russian war crimes evidence and the importance of supporting Ukraine. While our democracies have been strong enough to counter these threats, the Kremlin's "disinformation ecosystem" is nevertheless concerning, with its continuous attempts to sow discord and weaken the fabric of our societies.

Russian disinformation uses various channels, with content in multiple national languages and permanent online activism: trolls and other disinformation agents continuously reach Europeans and try to create a consensus towards their parallel truth – a situation we can no longer tolerate.

The EU has responded by starting information campaigns and launching a multilingual site run by the European External Action Service (EEAS), https://euvsdisinfo.eu. The site is tasked with debunking fake news and unveiling the tricks of foreign interference. However, our actions have so far failed to enjoy the same scale of outreach as Russian disinformation. I would point to three main reasons for this imbalance:

1. Russia uses disinformation as a basic tool in its foreign policy strategy, whereas the EU has merely been reacting and lacks a systematic approach to promoting its vision;
2. Russian embassies around the world are making extensive use of anti-Western propaganda, which EU delegations have responded to only in a limited number of
cases;
3. the Russian presidency has an official spokesperson to serve as an interlocutor for national and foreign press, while we have no clearly identifiable personality to oppose.

The EU institutions should be more active in shaping a clear and common European message that reaches our citizens’ hearts and takes the stage currently held by Russian propaganda. We need a strong positive narrative to give a new impetus to the European construction and to push back the negative voice of lies and manipulation. To pursue this outreach, the EU has a powerful ally, one that Russia does not have: a vibrant, pluralistic and well-organised civil society.

Civil society organisations are the beating heart of our democratic communities, and their involvement in countering foreign interference and propaganda can make the European message more effective, with immediate benefits for a sound and transparent democratic debate. The EESC is working on a project to capitalise on this crucial asset: the project would work as a synergy between the EESC and the national economic and social councils, with the help of the EEAS, the European Parliament and Russian civil society in exile. It would include a number of actions, including awareness-raising events in Member States which we aim to organise next year. We will of course keep you informed on the progress of this initiative.

To conclude, let me wish you all happy and peaceful end-of-year holidays. May 2023 see the resolution of the many problems that have arisen in 2022.

Dimitris Dimitriadis
REX Section President

Events

Transatlantic Relations Follow-up Committee
The EESC’s Transatlantic Relations Follow-up Committee met on 7 December. Prominent speakers held relevant discussions around three hot topics: multilateralism and the transatlantic vision for the United Nations; tackling the global energy emergency and economic consequences of the Russian aggression on Ukraine; the state of play in EU-Canada trade relations. At the end of the meeting, a book of collective works on cross-cutting perspectives of transatlantic cooperation was presented by its authors.
EESC high-level mission to Argentina

From 5 to 8 December, a delegation of three members of the Latin American Follow-up Committee accompanied President Schweng on her exploratory mission to Argentina. The main objective was to meet the new Chair of the Argentinian Economic and Social Council (Consejo Económico y Social, CES), Mercedes Marcó del Pont, and participate in a high-level event with the Argentinian counterparts to discuss challenges and opportunities for peace and democracy, energy transition, food security and climate change, fighting disinformation and promoting multilateralism. Besides the interinstitutional event in Casa Rosada, seat of the Argentinian Presidency, the EESC delegation held over 15 meetings with various counterparts, including the government and Congress of Argentina, employers, trade unions, cooperatives, human rights defenders, representatives of agribusiness, and of the Economic and Social Consultative Forum of Mercosur (FCES).
EU-Serbia JCC met in Belgrade to discuss the state of the art

At the 14th meeting of the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) held on 29 November in Belgrade, Serbian civil society demonstrated once again how vibrant and crucial its role is for Serbia's path towards EU membership. Prominent speakers from Serbian and EU institutions, as well as from civil society, pointed out challenges and potential directions for Serbia to go forward with the accession. The joint declaration of the EU-Serbia JCC was adopted unanimously.

JCC members deplored the lack of progress on Serbian side and invited the country's authority to speed up reform in different fields, like the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration, a new energy policy, sustainable development, migration and social partners' participation. It is also important that Serbia align with EU standards concerning the rule of law, and with the Union's common foreign and security policy. The declaration also calls on the Member States to continue to be supportive of the EU enlargement policy and expands on the recent proposal of European Political Community, on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and on the need to counter disinformation. Last but not least, the document calls for a more open civic space in Serbia, including the rights of minority populations and the LGBTIQ community.
EU-Chile JCC: mission to Santiago
On 21-23 November, the European members of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee visited Santiago to hold the 9th joint meeting with their Chilean counterpart. Discussions on civil society's role under the modernized Association Agreement confirmed the JCC’s strong commitment to continue working together. The JCC adopted a joint final declaration concerning the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on cooperation, trade, investment, decent work and the informal economy, the Sustainable Development Agenda and global stability; the declaration also contains a call for peace and stability and condemns Russia's aggression against Ukraine; furthermore, it requests a strengthened role for the JCC in the framework of the modernized Agreement.

During the mission, the delegation also visited the UN ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the region, the challenges posed by climate change and the opportunities opened by the digital transformation. The European delegation seized the opportunity of its meetings with representatives of the ministries of Women and Gender Equality, Social Development and Family, as well as Economy and Tourism, to recall the importance of civil society participation in shaping modern economic and social policies.
A discussion at the EESC on Russian refugees and disinformation

On 11 November, the EU-Russia Follow-Up Committee met to discuss “The flight of Russian youth from war and mobilisation: how is EU civil society helping these new refugees?”, with contributions from a specialist journalist, a young man who fled the country to avoid going to war against Ukraine and an academic from Groningen University. From the discussion, with contributions from the European Commission and the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (mainly exiled representatives of Russian civil society), it emerged that a campaign targeting Russian youth is urgently needed, as young people use their own channels of communication, and it is crucial that we reach out to them. Moreover, we should not isolate Russia's educational and academic world from their counterparts in the West: special exchange programmes with scholarships and grants were suggested in order to contribute to critical thinking and independent research despite the current repression. The second panel was specifically devoted to Russian propaganda, with the EESC planning to present a Project for a joint effort against disinformation in the EU, as described in the editorial.
The EESC at the 2nd EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in London

On 7 and 8 November, UK and EU parliamentary delegations participated in the second meeting of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA) in Westminster, following the PPA's inaugural meeting in Brussels in May 2022. Established under the terms of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), the PPA acts as a forum for the UK Parliament and the European Parliament to discuss current EU-UK developments. In both meetings the EESC was represented by Jack O'Connor, chair of the EU-UK Follow-up Committee, and Tanja Buzek, chair of the EU Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) under the TCA.

The meeting was devoted to energy and security cooperation across Europe, as well as relations between the PPA, civil society and the UK’s devolved nations. Furthermore, the participants engaged in a debate on the future of Europe and the future UK-EU relationship. On the first day, Mr O'Connor and Ms Buzek took part in the breakout group on citizens' rights, where they expressed the EESC's views on how to address the unresolved legal status of EU citizens in the UK. On the second day, Mr O'Connor presented the views of EU’s organised civil society on future cooperation between the EU and the UK and their respective civil society organisations.
The EESC at the 42nd session of the EU-ACP Joint Parliamentary Assembly in Mozambique

On 29 October - 2 November, the ACP-EU Follow-Up Committee took part in the 42nd session of the EU-ACP Joint Parliamentary Assembly in the Mozambican capital Maputo, as well as in the civil society fora and workshops organised ahead of the plenary assembly. The delegation was composed of EESC members Dimitris Dimitriadis, Carlos Trindade and Marie Josiane Willems and by ACP member Richard Henry Kimera. In his address to the Joint Parliamentary Assembly, Mr Dimitriadis, REX section president, insisted on the need to quickly sign and implement the post-Cotonou Agreement and to put in place the required mechanism for civil society participation. During the debate on the upcoming stakeholder consultation mechanism, Mr Trindade emphasised the extensive experience of the ACP-EU Follow-Up Committee under the Cotonou Agreement and the EESC’s readiness to play a role in the upcoming mechanism.

On the side-lines of the event, the EESC delegation met with the co-chair of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly, Carlos Zorrinho (S&D, PT), and with representatives of Mozambican civil society (youth, human rights and democracy groups, women, farmers, employers and trade unions).
United Kingdom: EESC mission and information report

The EU-UK Follow-up Committee was set up in March 2021, with the primary objective to maintain and strengthen relations between UK and EU civil society organisations and monitor the implementation of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement. To that end, an EU-UK Follow-up Committee delegation carried out a **five-day fact-finding mission to the UK on 17-21 October**. The delegation engaged with representatives of employer associations, trade unions, farmers and third-sector civil society organisations from across the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), as well as with government officials in some of the devolved nations. During the visits, our delegation discussed post-Brexit issues, particularly those arising from the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, and heard the participants' views on the role of civil society organisations in this context.

Based on the information collected during the mission, including a survey focused on civil society relations, citizens' rights and the Northern Ireland Protocol, the Follow-up Committee is currently drawing up an **information report on the implementation of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement**. The main political objective of this information report, to be adopted in the EESC Plenary in January 2023, is to feed into the political dialogue between the EU and the UK and to promote a joint reflection on their future relationship.
EU-Vietnam civil society: DAG-to-DAG meeting in Hanoi

On 18-20 October 2022, the EU and the Vietnamese Domestic Advisory Groups (EU DAG and Vietnam DAG) met for the first time in person. The event took place in Hanoi, as part of the second joint meeting under the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). The two DAGs agreed to create a working group to enhance joint discussions on EU-Vietnam supply chains in terms of due diligence, to jointly develop a roadmap on climate and environmental protection and to call for ratification of all the ILO’s fundamental conventions, including Conventions No 155 and No 187 on occupational safety and health. They also stressed that DAGs play a key role in the implementation of the EVFTA. The parties to the EVFTA should make use of the two DAGs’ experience on the ground to improve the process (see the joint statement).

During the meeting of the Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development, EU DAG chair Judith Kirton-Darling, referring to the EU DAG statement of 29 September 2022, pointed out that civil society's space has been shrinking in Vietnam (see here). Additionally, the EU DAG underlined that human rights are an essential part of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Vietnam, so they apply in an overarching way to the entire EVFTA. In this respect, the EU DAG reiterated the July 2022 decision made by the EU Ombudsman.
Energy and geopolitics in the Euro-Mediterranean region: a conference in Rome

On 17 October, the EESC and the Italian National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEI) held a conference in Rome on the Geopolitics of energy strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The conference underlined the potential of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood countries to become producers of green hydrogen: the area could become a key player in the energy sector to the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

The discussions developed against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine: EESC president Christa Schweng said that increasing energy security and autonomy, as well as stepping up our cooperation throughout the region, are goals that can be carried out with the involvement of organised civil society. MEP Patrizia Toia stressed that Member States need to strengthen their links with the Southern Neighbourhood in order to provide sustainable alternative energy providers. The region's high renewable energy potential will be instrumental for the EU in achieving its ambitious decarbonisation targets while avoiding new energy dependencies. Lastly, CNEI president Tiziano Treu underlined the need for further collaboration, since the Southern Mediterranean has been identified as one of the three major corridors for green hydrogen imports by the EU.
**REX exploratory mission to Egypt**
The External Relations Section organised an exploratory mission to Cairo and Alexandria on 11-13 October 2022, consisting of three EESC members. The EESC delegation met representatives of the Egyptian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Social Solidarity and of Manpower to present next year’s Euromed Summit that the EESC will co-organise with the Union for the Mediterranean's secretariat and with the Anna Lindh Foundation. In addition, the three EESC members met the deputy chair of the Federation of Egyptian Industries to discuss Egypt's important role as an energy hub and its huge potential for renewable energies. Furthermore, they met the head of the EU Delegation to Egypt and the director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina to discuss upcoming steps in the preparations for next year's Euromed Summit. Finally, they also brought together trade union representatives and NGOs to evaluate the situation of civil society in Egypt.

**EU-UK DAG-to-DAG meeting and joint statement**
On 3 October, the EU and UK DAGs established under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) met for the first time in DAG-to-DAG format at the EESC’s premises in Brussels. After an introductory round, the two DAGs took stock of their activities up to this point, from internal organisation and institutional interaction with their respective governmental counterparts, to TCA implementation and monitoring. On this point, the discussion mainly revolved around three topics: a level playing field, the non-regression clause and Northern Ireland. A joint statement based on the discussion highlights the common challenges faced by the two parties, stresses the vital role of civil society organisations and cooperation between them, and calls for a more conducive and stable political relationship between the UK and the EU as a prerequisite for the proper implementation of the TCA. The document was presented the following day at the first EU-UK Civil Society Forum, hosted by DG Trade in Brussels.
WTO Public Forum in Geneva
The World Trade Organisation’s Public Forum took place in Geneva on 27-30 September. Some 3 200 participants from all over the globe gathered to discuss the topic **Towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery: ambition to action**. For the second consecutive year, the session proposed by the EESC was among the ones selected by the organisation: the panel on **Sustainable trade for supply chain resilience: an inclusive WTO governance addressing labour and climate challenges** was held on 29 September, moderated by our member Tanja Buzek, with a high-level panel of **speakers** from the ILO, the International Chamber of Shipping and DG TRADE.

As well as the panel, the EESC delegation met bilaterally with Ambassador João Aguiar Machado, EU Permanent Representative to the WTO, and Ambassador Jean-Marie Paugam, WTO Deputy Director-General: the meetings led to a fruitful discussion and provided first-hand insights into the present and future of the WTO and into the EU’s role in it.

Mission to Albania
On 27-28 September, a three-member EESC delegation went on a mission to Tirana, Albania. The EESC was invited to participate and speak in two panels of the 2022 Tirana Connectivity Forum dedicated to secure and future-proof enlargement. As part of this exploratory mission, the EESC delegation met with representatives of social partners, including members of the National Labour Council, of important national and cross-sectoral networks of civil society organisations, of the government, of the ILO and of the EU Delegation in Albania, to discuss the establishment of an EU-Albania Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee (JCC). On numerous occasions the EESC has expressed its determination to establish a JCC with Albania as soon as the first clusters/chapters of accession negotiations are open, in order for the JCC to voice the concerns of EU and Albanian organised civil society throughout the accession process (as is currently the case for Montenegro and Serbia).
Youth in the Western Balkans: a high-level conference
On 16 September, the EESC held a civil society high-level conference entitled *Youth Policy in the Western Balkans – An essential element for the future of the region and Europe*, as a follow-up to opinion REX/553 on *Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans*. The event, which was part of the Committee's activities during the 2022 European Year of Youth, took place under the auspices of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU and was included in the list of its cultural and other accompanying events in the Czech Republic and abroad. The conclusions from the Conference were published on its [website](#) and sent to all high-level stakeholders. [Read more](#) or [watch](#) the recording.

The EU-Korea Civil Society Forum on climate activities, ILO conventions and platform work
On 13 September, the EU-Korea Civil Society Forum (CSF) met in Seoul under the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement. Members of the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) from both sides discussed the role of the DAGs and the CSF, climate cooperation in the EU and South Korea, and the ratification and full implementation of ILO conventions as well as occupational safety and health. The CSF was followed by a workshop on platform work (to be continued at the next CSF) and due diligence. With regard to the roles of DAGs and the CSF, the latter is expected to focus on developing good practices – including procedural aspects – bringing together the government, employers and trade unions, and to engage with external experts from the ILO, the Economic, Social and Labour Council and academia. Regarding trade and sustainable development, the CSF took note of the presentation on the EU's strategies to strengthen the monitoring and implementation of TSD chapters in trade agreements. The [joint conclusions](#) can be found here.
EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform started its work

On 1 September, the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform (CSP) under the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement held its inaugural meeting in Yerevan. This first sitting was the result of joint efforts by the EESC, the EU Delegation in Armenia, DG NEAR and Armenian civil society organisations, who, after two EESC missions to Armenia, agreed on the composition and design of the platform. The meeting brought together representatives of European and Armenian civil society, the European Commission, the Armenian government and the EU Delegation in Yerevan. During this first discussion, CSP members adopted the platform's rules of procedure and agreed on the first set of joint recommendations. They also agreed that the second meeting would take place in Brussels in early spring 2023. President of the European Council Charles Michel and High-Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell welcomed the establishment of the platform in the letters they wrote to the EESC President.

All-DAGs meeting: Domestic Advisory Groups are delivering

On 12 July, the EESC hosted the second meeting of all EU DAGs. Key stakeholders such as Maria Martin-Prat and Denis Redonnet from DG TRADE, EESC President Christa Schweng and MEP Bernd Lange took part in the discussions.

The meeting discussed the balance between pragmatic dialogue with partners and the enforcement of Trade and Sustainable Development chapters (TSD), as well as the role of DAGs and civil society in the free trade agreements (FTAs) between the EU and the rest of the world. The meeting followed the adoption of a European Commission communication on the TSD review entitled “The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth”, which strengthens TSD enforcement and the role of the DAGs.

In conclusion, EESC DAG coordinator Tanja Buzek summarised the key messages from the discussion: DAGs are living, ever-improving entities that are much more than their meetings and need a constant, open and wide-ranging information flow. A detailed report of the meeting will follow on our website.
Opinions in the spotlight

**REX/548** Cultural diplomacy as a vector of EU external relations – new partnerships and role of CSOs (adopted on 26/10/2022)

The Committee believes culture to be at the very core of the European project and considers it an asset both for its internal path and for the image that the EU projects beyond its borders. At a time when war has returned to the European continent, now more than ever we need cultural relations to be a tool for dialogue, peace and the future. It is now time to adopt a fully-fledged multiannual strategic action plan under the coordination of the EU External Action Service.

Action needs to be stepped up immediately to protect, restore and rebuild heritage in areas hit by natural disasters, crises and conflicts. More ambitious measures should be undertaken in the field of the creative industries. Significant pilot projects should be launched in areas such as the Western Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine. Such efforts should aim to create a key dedicated structure within the EEAS, centred around an "EU Special Envoy for Cultural Relations", to develop initiatives with national and local stakeholders in their respective countries. [Check out the Twitter story](#).

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**REX 551** Multilateral investor-State arbitration court: assessment of the UNCITRAL process and its achievements in light of civil society recommendations (adopted on 26/10/2022)

Investor-State dispute settlement (ISDS) is a mechanism of free trade agreements and international investment agreements for settling disputes on the implementation of investment protection agreements. The system has been the subject of much criticism from civil society, with concerns including the protection of labour rights and the environment.

The EESC reminds the Commission of its request to be more closely involved in the Commission's work with the UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) and encourages it to address the issue of the exhaustion of local remedies before any international referral; the current system discriminates against SMEs, given their limited financial resources, and ISDS should be used as an extraordinary remedy.

The EESC believes that EU investment policy should not only meet investor and recipient State expectations, but also the EU's wider economic interests, external policy objectives and priorities, particularly those on environmental
EESC rapporteur Christophe Quarez emphasised that the common objective is to find a balance between protecting investments and protecting the general interest: all stakeholders must be heard by the State/investor arbitration bodies. For a multilateral ISDS reform to make a real difference, it is essential to take a more holistic approach to international investment governance, moving away from ad hoc arbitration and not merely replacing ISDS arbitration with an investor-State court.
Opinions and information reports adopted by the December plenary session

**REX/549** Digital transition in the Euro-Mediterranean region

**REX/552** Socio-economic situation in Latin America following the COVID-19 crisis — the role of civil society in the recovery process

COVID-19 has hit Latin America particularly hard, with an above-world-average death toll, extreme pressure on health systems, and an economic slowdown. The region has lost more than a decade in terms of poverty reduction and is one of the most unequal in the world, while several effects of the pandemic have been worsened by Russia’s war against Ukraine. The health and inflation crises have added to previously existing social exclusion, lack of safety, and a middle class at constant risk of falling into poverty, which in turn has led to social unrest and a lack of confidence in the institutions. Latin America needs a new social contract between socio-economic groups, regions and generations. It is vital to strengthen political accountability, ensure inclusion and protection, generate quality employment and foster the green and digital transition. All this requires a strong citizens’ participation, and a real empowerment of young people and women. Europe and Latin America can be partners to support a recovery that includes civil society, attract investments compatible with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and promote a trade partnership that sets itself apart in terms of its quality and long-term sustainability, in contrast to other, predatory and irresponsible international relationship models.
Ongoing opinions and information reports

**REX 566** Youth action plan in the EU external action  
**REX 565** Forced labour products ban  
**REX 563** The implementation of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland  
**REX 562** The EU Strategic Compass  
**REX 561** The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth  
**REX 555** Energy policies and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region

**REX/558** Setting the course for a sustainable blue planet, an update of the international ocean governance agenda  
The year 2022 has been a "super year" for the oceans and seas, with various agreements and conventions under negotiation and the topic having been considered by the Green Deal and COP27. Meanwhile, marine environment health is declining due to unsustainable human activities. To take stock of the situation, the European Commission published a communication setting out four priorities: strengthening ocean governance, making ocean sustainability a reality by 2030, making the ocean a safe and secure space, and strengthening ocean literacy. The EESC is now working on an opinion that supports the prohibition of deep-sea mining until sufficient scientific evidence is gathered, and underlines that the fishery sector must be socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Due attention is given to unexploded ordnance (UXOs), ship demolition and flags of convenience and to **ILO C188 – Work in Fishing Convention** from 2007, which has not yet been ratified even by a number of EU Member States.

**18 November 2022 | 9.30-13.00**  
**EESC | VMA3 | 10 a.m. - 1 p.m.**

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A study on disinformation

Our trainee Davide D'Amico has written an essay on **social media and Russian disinformation** as part of his studies:

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