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OFFICE 25

Oliver Röpke
President of the EESC



European Economic
and Social Committee

Inauguration Speech

26 April 2023, 14:00

“Check against delivery”

*Presidents of the European institutions;
Ministers;
Vice-President Šefčovič;
Vice-President Regner;
Commissioner Schmit;
Your Excellencies, ambassadors;
Members of the European Parliament and of national parliaments;
Shada, Petra;*

AND OF COURSE

*Members of our Committee;
Presidents of the National ESCs;
Social partners,
Friends and partners from civil society;
Members of the EESC staff;*

Today is a big day for our Committee.

And it's also a big day for me.

Every two and a half years, our Committee “renews” itself, and the 329 members of our Committee elect their new leadership.

Today is the day!

Congratulations to all of you who have been elected, re-elected or appointed today:

- The vice-presidents Krzysztof and Laurențiu;
- The Section and CCMI presidents, Baiba, Cinzia, Dimitris, Ioannis, Peter, Sandra and Pietro;
- The newly elected members of our Bureau;
- The presidents of all the other groups and working bodies.

I wish you all the best of luck in your future responsibilities.

You will always have my full support.

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Committee members,

Today you have elected me as your next president.

Let me tell you that I am deeply honoured by the trust you have placed in me.

When I started as a Member of our Committee back in 2009, I could not have imagined that I would one day be elected president.

Thank you for your confidence!

This is also a good time to thank my predecessors, many of whom are present here today, and in particular President Schweng.

Liebe Christa, this morning we had an opportunity to look back together on your achievements during your term as Committee President.

You have demonstrated leadership in very challenging circumstances.

Together with your team – Vice-Presidents Giulia Barbucci and Cillian Lohan – and with the support of all our colleagues from the Secretariat, you have successfully navigated the Committee through the storms of COVID-19.

And you have initiated and implemented major reforms to our Committee that will long be remembered.

We all thank you for that, and I will make sure to continue along the path of reform and modernisation of the EESC.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

In turbulent times like these, no one can successfully lead an important EU institution like the EESC alone.

You need a strong team and team spirit.

That is why I am proud to have such an outstanding team by my side.

Together with my vice-presidents Laurențiu and Krzysztof, our Section presidents, our Group presidents Lucie, Stefano, and Séamus, and our dedicated staff in the Secretariat, I know that I can rely on a strong and united team that will advise me and guide me in my decisions during my term as Committee President.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I have listened very carefully to the expectations that our members and our partners from civil society organisations expressed in the video that we just saw.

And I can promise you that, as your new president, I will work hard to meet your expectations.

Together with all of you!

In times like these, team spirit and unity are more necessary than ever.

And, ladies and gentlemen, in times like these, the EESC too is more necessary than ever.



When we look around us, we see that freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are under attack.

Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine; the rise of authoritarianism and the decline of democratic rule; the ongoing efforts to destabilise entire nations and to spread disinformation: these are just some of the developments that demand our full attention and our action.

People in our direct neighbourhood – in Moldova, in Georgia, in Belarus, in the Western Balkans, and, of course, in Ukraine – need us now more than ever.

They need more than just nice words.

They need our support.

They need the European Union.

As the newly-elected President of our Committee, I want to reach out to those countries in our neighbourhood that are in distress.

Let us build a gateway to democracy and prosperity for our neighbours and partners!

Our Committee must be at the forefront when it comes to inviting our civil society friends from the EU candidate countries to participate in our daily work.

Many of you are here with us today.

We have representatives here from Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, and many more.

Thank you for coming! It is good to have you with us today!

I am convinced that I speak on behalf of all members of our Committee when I say to you:

“We will not let you down when you need us! Europe will not let you down!”

For some time now, our Committee has been doing outstanding work through our Joint Consultative Committees, civil society platforms and other bodies that facilitate the path to the EU.

Now we should go one step further.

My proposal as President – as set out in my manifesto – is that the EESC should appoint honorary enlargement ambassadors from our civil society partners in EU candidate countries.

We should, for the first time, involve them in the daily advisory work of our Committee, on issues that are important to you and to us, so that we can learn from each other.

Together, we can be better prepared for accession and pave the way to democracy and prosperity.

We will also work tirelessly to strengthen our cooperation with international organisations at the highest level, as well as with key international partners, among which the United Kingdom holds a special place.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Committee also has an essential role to play when it comes to fighting the rise of authoritarianism and the decline of democratic rule, at home and abroad.

A recent report by Freedom House shows that global democracy has been declining for the last 16 years.

Today, 38% of the global population lives in countries that are “not free”.

That’s the highest percentage since 1997.

We cannot let this go on.

There can never be an EU without democracy, and democracy needs the EU.

Now is the time to stand up for democracy!

Democracy, fundamental rights, human rights, and rules-based international cooperation are pillars of the EU Treaties and of our way of life.

We must defend them every day, and never take them for granted.

Civil society has a crucial role to play here.

But civil society itself is increasingly under pressure.

In many countries, the civic space is shrinking.

Civil society organisations are finding it more and more difficult to access funding.

Freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are under attack in many places.

Media freedom and pluralism are being violated.

We cannot let that happen!

Shrinking the space for civil society means shrinking democracy!

Our Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group in the EESC has done an outstanding job in highlighting developments that are harmful to civil society and to democracy.

As your newly-elected President, I will ensure a robust mandate for our Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group during my term of office.

The EESC must strengthen its role as a democratic watchdog and perform regular civil society health checks in order to proactively monitor the well-being of civil society in EU Member States and candidate countries.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

As the newly-elected President of the EESC, my mandate will lead directly into one of the cornerstones of European democracy: the 2024 European Parliament elections.

These elections come at a crucial point in time, with major European issues high on the agenda. These include:

- the green and digital transition;
- dramatic climate change and the need for a green and social deal;
- the sustainable competitiveness of European industry and SMEs;
- the fight against inflation and the cost of living crisis.

Healthy democracies depend upon the freedom to make informed choices on how society should tackle these issues.

That is why we must protect the 2024 European Parliament elections against disinformation, propaganda and cyber-attacks that try to destabilise our democratic processes.

Healthy democracies also depend upon the broadest possible participation by citizens.

Therefore, we as the EESC, together with our partners in the EU institutions and civil society, will ensure that our Committee is closely involved in the 2024 European Parliament elections. In particular we will support activities and campaigns to increase voter participation.

Let us stand up together for democracy and speak up for Europe!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe not only provided legitimate grounds for the EESC to take an active role as a key partner in the run-up to the European Parliament elections.

From my own participation in the Conference, I also learned about the significant added value of participatory democracy. In the digital age of the 21st century, participatory and representative democracy are not mutually exclusive. They are, in fact, inextricably linked to one another.

In today's world, citizens and civil society expect more direct involvement in democratic decision-making.

And we should listen to them.

As President of our Committee, I therefore propose laying the foundations for making regular use of participatory citizen panels in the daily work of the EESC.

Ahead of the European Parliament elections in 2024, I advocate setting up participatory EESC citizen panels. They should provide input for a resolution by all EESC Sections setting out the Committee's main demands for the new European Parliament and the new European Commission: "The EESC's 2024 Election Manifesto".

I am firmly convinced that our Committee, as the house of organised civil society, is the best place to ensure broader citizen and civil society participation fit for the new digital age.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

Broad participation also means opening up our Committee even further.

The EESC must redouble its efforts to become a more representative voice.

First, we have to give young people more room to voice their opinion.

The EESC must provide them with a platform to raise their concerns and needs.

They need to have a say on those decisions that will impact them now and in the future.

Important and pioneering work is already underway in this regard.

The EESC has adopted ambitious opinions and resolutions when it comes to actively involving young people in its work.

But our Committee has not stopped there.

We have already made it clear that we want to go much further:

- including youth delegates in official EU and EESC delegations;
- involving young voices in EESC opinions and round tables;
- and organising major youth events such as our flagship “Your Europe Your Say”.

They all show that our Committee has understood the signs of the times.

Thank you to all our members and staff who have worked so hard to make this happen!

As the newly-elected President, I will continue along this path at full speed.

Among other things, I propose:

- to create a “Young EESC Ad Hoc Group” on youth engagement;
- to immediately start work with all the sections and the CCMI on implementing the EU Youth Test in EESC opinions;
- to expand the role of “EESC youth delegates” in the Committee’s daily work, as demonstrated by their successful participation in the EESC delegation to the United Nations Climate Change Conference;
- To step up our youth activities under the established EESC brand “Your Europe, Your Say!” (YEYS);
- To establish a “Youth Advisory Council to the President”, with a mandate to provide pragmatic and results-oriented recommendations from a variety of perspectives from young activists, in particular on climate change.

I am convinced that these steps are needed if we are to make the EESC a true “New Generation Forum” for the 21st century.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to turn to a subject that is equally important to me, and where we as a Committee still have work to do.

Standing up for democracy and equal rights must always start within the walls of your own house.

That is why the EESC must double down on its internal reforms to ensure greater transparency, integrity and fairness.

At the EESC, we all strongly oppose any form of discrimination, including gender discrimination.

If we want to achieve a fairer and stronger Europe, we must achieve gender equality.

Our Committee has a decisive role to play here.

It starts with the example we set as an assembly and the decisions we take.

As President, I will strengthen the mandate of our Equality Group;

Together we will propose concrete measures to improve the gender balance at the EESC;

I will seek strategic collaboration with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council to mainstream gender equality in all relevant EU policies;

I will advocate solutions – if necessary structural ones – to increase the share of female representation everywhere in the Committee. And we must carefully monitor progress through regular reports;

And I will continue to boost the transparency of the EESC's work, through our involvement in the EU transparency register and the EU ethics body.

.....
Ladies and gentlemen,

The EESC, as the European house of organised civil society, is the best place to anticipate and raise the concerns of citizens.

If we want to successfully contribute to the political agenda of the EU institutions, we need to take an evidence-based and forward-looking approach to our work.

A modern EESC should play an important role as a "horizon scanner" for the multiple transformation processes going on today.

Adapting to changing times entails proactively identifying megatrends. It also means finding gaps in legislation and working on proposals for action plans.

I therefore propose to systematically embed the foresight dimension in the EESC's work and I expressly thank Vice-President Šefčovič for supporting this.

A forward-looking perspective to our work would allow us to better position the EESC in the decision-making process and to propose new priorities for the next Commission.



As the new President, I would therefore like to strengthen our relationship with think tanks by involving them more regularly in the preparation of selected opinions.

I will also invite our think tank partners to an annual "EESC Think Tank Summit".

We should also make better strategic use of exploratory and own-initiative opinions. They can position our Committee as an "idea generator" for long-term challenges, as we are already doing in our "Call for an EU Blue Deal".

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude on a very personal note.
I cannot hide where I come from, and neither do I want to.
Quite the contrary,

I am proud to have worked as a trade unionist for decades, in Austria and at European level, standing up for the social rights of working people and their families.

My priority as a trade unionist will always be to secure and strengthen the European Social Model as an integral part of our European Union.

For me, the continued implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights remains a top priority, including in the candidate countries in our neighborhood.

I especially want to thank President von der Leyen and Commissioner Nicolas Schmit for their constant support in ensuring that the social and economic dimensions of the EU are put on an equal footing.

In this endeavour, you have always had the EESC on your side.

The approach taken by the Commission and the European Parliament, supported by many Member States, has reconciled many working people with the EU. Today, many of these people finally see the EU as a defender of their social rights and their working and living conditions.

We should do everything in our power to secure these important achievements for the future.

As this year marks the 30th anniversary of the EU Single Market, Europe must focus its efforts on upward social and economic convergence that leaves no one behind.

Having said this as a member of the Workers' Group with a life-long trade union background, I can assure you that, as President of the EESC, I will do everything in my power to guarantee that all groups can advance their key issues in our Committee.

Our shared interest should always be to strive to reach well-informed and meaningful compromises, as we have successfully demonstrated in the past.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

As I come to the end of my speech, I would like to thank those of you without whom I could never have managed the many challenges over the last few years.

Firstly, I would like to thank the many dedicated staff at the EESC who support us tirelessly every day.

In the last few weeks, many of you have tested the limits of your resilience while preparing the mid-term renewal of our Committee.

I owe all of you a big thank you – you have done a great job!

Secondly, I would like to thank all my companions of the last few years: colleagues and staff from my group; but also my many friends from all the other groups in our Committee, who have always been there to give me advice and support when I needed it.

I will continue to make sure that the three EESC groups have the same opportunities and chances to advance their priorities in the house.

Thirdly, I would like to thank my home organisation, the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), for the many years of support, in particular ÖGB President Wolfgang Katzian and ÖGB Vice-President and member of the Austrian Federal Council, Korinna Schumann. Thank you for being here today, Korinna!

But none of this would have been possible today without the support of my family, who have always stood by me and who have often had to do without me. Thank you to my beloved wife – Jamila you are amazing!

Thank you to my wonderful daughters Manoua and Soline and to my father who made the long journey to Brussels. Thank you very much for being with me at this very important moment!

And finally I would like to thank my beloved mother, who is no longer with us, but who is probably looking down from somewhere else today. Take care, mum!

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Friends,

Together, let's make this new term of office a success:

Together,
Let's stand up for democracy,

Together,
Let's speak up for Europe!

Thank you very much!

