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**Civil society organisations are the first port of call in times of crisis and can help the EU stick together**

**At their annual meeting, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the EU's national Economic and Social Councils discussed the integration of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, the EU's open strategic autonomy and enhancing the EESC's role following the Conference on the Future of Europe.**

European organised civil society can and must contribute to providing an effective answer to the EU's current geopolitical challenges, such as the integration of people fleeing the war in Ukraine and the need for strategic autonomy.

These are the main takeaways from the annual meeting of the presidents and secretaries-general of the EESC and the EU's national Economic and Social Councils, hosted by the Romanian Economic and Social Council in Bucharest on 9-10 November 2022.

Referring to the vital on-the-ground work carried out by civil society organisations, EESC president **Christa Schweng** said: "Civil society is in a position to inform policy-makers and the public on what works well, but also on shortcomings and dangers. In times of crisis, it is the first port of call. When the war broke out, it mobilised its organisations with lightning speed to come to the aid of the most vulnerable."

In the same vein, **Bogdan Simion**, president of the Romanian Economic and Social Council, underlined that Romanian civil society organisations were on the frontline of the recent refugee crisis, and that the EU must never lose sight of its fundamental values such as unity and solidarity, especially when facing issues that may be divisive.

The meeting pointed out the urgent need to adopt measures to prioritise the EU's recovery and mitigate the economic and social impact of the war in Ukraine, ensure the security of energy supply at affordable costs and improve the EU's food security.

The military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has made the energy crisis worse in Europe and worldwide, strengthening the need for the EU's open strategic autonomy in the field of energy.

This means reinforcing EU sovereignty, minimising EU dependence on unreliable suppliers or on States that do not share EU values, and ensuring security of supply at a cost which is "as affordable as possible" for consumers and businesses.

Food availability is currently not an issue in the European Union but, because of soaring prices in agricultural products, affordability of food products is becoming a problem, especially for low-income households.

It is therefore important to invest in more diversified EU food systems (organic farming, farm shops, urban farming and support the "local for local" approach), short supply chains and intelligent food stock management.

European civil society organisations are at the forefront in addressing the integration needs of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, and have been instrumental in providing practical help to tackle the humanitarian, social and economic consequences of the war on refugees across Europe, in particular in the most affected countries such as Poland, Romania, Hungary and Germany.

To better connect with EU citizens and involve civil society in the EU legislative process, a strong participatory democracy in the EU decision-making process remains essential: civil society organisations are active on the ground and can flag up what works and what does not.

Recognising its meaningful contribution, the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe explicitly refers to the importance of organised civil society in the architecture of European democracy and recommends "enhancing the institutional role of the EESC and empowering it as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities".

For further information on the annual meeting, please consult the [EESC website](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/2022-annual-meeting-presidents-and-secretaries-general-eesc-and-national-escs-eu).

**For more information please contact:**

# EESC Press Unit – Marco Pezzani +32 (0)2 546 97 93 · Mob. +32 (0)470 881 903

[marco.pezzani@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:marco.pezzani@eesc.europa.eu)

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*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process.*

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