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REX

**External Relations
Section**



European Economic and Social Committee

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EU'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

In recent years, the international relations of the European Union have opened up to new actors from civil society, and the international agreements signed by the EU include arrangements on an almost systematic basis aiming to establish dialogue at civil society level. In its capacity as institutional representative of European organised civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee's role is therefore evolving. Nevertheless, its core task remains that of supporting the EU's external activities by conducting a dialogue with the civil society organisations of the non-EU countries and geographical groupings with which the EU has formal relations.

THE SECTION FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The Section for External Relations comprises 140 members. It is led by a president, three vice-presidents and a 12 member bureau.

The principal areas of activity of the Section for External Relations (REX) include monitoring relations between the European Union and the countries and regions with which the EU has formal relations, and developing relations with civil society in these countries and regions, particularly in the candidate countries and in the EU's neighbourhood. The Section is especially active in following up the EU's trade policy.

The Section's consultative work involves drafting opinions at the request of the European institutions. During the drafting process, the Section works closely with the European institutions, representatives of European civil society organisations which are not represented within the EESC and representatives of civil society in third countries.

OUR EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURS

The Section's external activities relating to the countries neighbouring Europe are organised on several fronts:

• THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

The Section is currently involved in the enlargement process for Turkey and the Western Balkan countries pursuant to the various association treaties in force. Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, comprising EESC members and representatives of the civil society of the countries concerned, have been set up. They meet twice a year to discuss developments in the accession negotiations or the integration process and to adopt recommendations for the political authorities. The JCCs also play an important role in the dissemination of information on the EU among the citizens of the candidate and potential candidate countries.

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• THE WESTERN BALKANS

A Western Balkan Civil Society Forum has met every two years since 2006. It brings together civil society representatives from the region and from the EESC to discuss common issues. The participants adopt conclusions which are subsequently addressed to the political authorities of the EU and the region. The Section endeavours to establish or consolidate economic and social councils in the countries concerned. Joint Consultative Committees are set up in line with the stabilisation and association agreements signed with countries in the region.

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• EASTERN NEIGHBOURS

The eastern dimension of the European neighbourhood policy (ENP) is monitored by the Section in order to develop close contacts with civil society organisations from Europe's eastern neighbours (Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus and the Caucasian countries) and to facilitate their development.

The EESC is currently taking part in the Civil Society Platforms that were established by the Association Agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We also provide members and secretariat support to the civil society domestic advisory groups in those same agreements.

The EESC is an active member of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, where it promotes the participation of social partners and other economic and social organisations.



1st meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform

- **RUSSIA**

The section also monitors relations between the European Union and Russian civil society. Working relations have been established with the Russian Civic Chamber and the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

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- **EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA**

Comprising representatives of the EFTA Consultative Committee from the EEA on the one hand and EESC members on the other, the EEA Consultative Committee meets once a year to look at questions of shared interest and put forward joint recommendations to the EU and EEA authorities.

- **THE EUROMED REGION**

The 1995 Ministerial Declaration of Barcelona called on the EESC to establish links with its counterparts and equivalent bodies in the Mediterranean.

Since then, the Section supports the organisation of an annual Euro-Mediterranean Summit of Economic and Social Councils. At these summits, recommendations are adopted and forwarded to the political authorities. EESC members present these recommendations at the Euromed Ministerial Conferences, before the Euromed

Parliamentary Assembly (where the EESC has the status of observer), the secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean, the European External Action Service and the European Commission.

In close coordination with its partners from the southern countries, the Section focuses particularly on monitoring the involvement of civil society in framing and implementing the national action plans, as well as the negotiations of free trade agreements with partner countries in the south.

One of the Section's key objectives is to contribute to the consolidation and setting-up of national economic and social councils in this region. Thus, in recent years, Jordanian and Moroccan councils have been set up and steps have been taken to promote the establishment of an ESC in Tunisia and in Palestine.

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Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions, Athens, 24-25 October 2016. Mr Vernikos, President of the Greek ESC, Mr Tsipras, Greek Prime Minister, Mr Dassis, President of the EESC

THE AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN AND PACIFIC COUNTRIES (ACP) AND THE EU-AFRICA STRATEGY

The Cotonou Agreement acknowledges the potentially vital role of non-State actors in the ACP countries' development process and empowers the EESC to organise consultation sessions and meetings of the EU-ACP economic and social interest groups.

On this basis, the Section has regular contacts with the economic and social actors of the ACP countries. These contacts principally take the form of:

- regional seminars;
- general meetings held in Brussels every three years with representatives of all the ACP countries.

One of the Section's objectives is to provide information on the Cotonou Agreement and, through close cooperation with the ACP partners, to monitor its implementation and in particular the involvement of civil society. This activity is carried out in partnership with the European Commission. The Section also contributes to the meetings of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

In recent years, the Section, with its ACP partners, has also monitored negotiations on the economic partnership agreements (EPAs). The EESC has drawn up recommendations urging the integration of the social and environmental dimensions into these agreements and the establishment of follow-up mechanisms at civil society level. In this connection, initiatives have been taken to promote the setting-up of networks of ACP economic and social actors at regional level.



15th Regional Seminar of ACP-EU Economic and Social Interest Groups, in Nairobi, Kenya, on 04-05/07/2016, chaired by Mr Somville, President of the EU-ACP Follow-up Committee

The EU-Cariforum Joint Consultative Committee, set up in 2014 in the framework of the EC-Cariforum EPA, is a first success in this area.

The Section also drafts opinions on the EU development policy in general at the request of the European Commission or on its own initiative.

At the European Commission's request, the Section has made its contribution to the EU-Africa Strategy by setting up an EU-Africa Network of Economic and Social Actors, which meets yearly since 2014.

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ASIA



14th meeting of the EU-China Round Table, Brussels, May 2016, co-chaired by Mr Dassis, EESC President, and Mr Xu Zhenhuan, vice-president of the Chinese ESC

In Asia, the EESC has established working relations with South Korea, China and Japan. Opinions have also been adopted and contacts forged with other countries and regions: India, Central Asia, the ASEAN.

• CHINA

The EU-China Summit of September 2006 acknowledged that exchanges and cooperation between the EESC and the Chinese Economic and Social Council constituted a part of the EU-China relationship, and called for the establishment of

a regular round table. This round table has met twice a year since then, forwarding its recommendations to the political authorities of the European Union and China.

- **JAPAN**

The EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement has given the Section the opportunity to develop contacts with its Japanese counterpart organisations, with which it aims to set up a joint monitoring mechanism of the current negotiations.

- **SOUTH KOREA**

The Section contributes, through its members and Secretariat, to the work of the EU-Korea Civil Society Forum provided for by the EU-Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement.

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LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

At the request of the European Commission, since 1999 the Section has been organising meetings between the organised civil society of Europe and Latin America. At these meetings, recommendations are adopted which are then presented by the EESC President to the EU-CELAC Summits. Furthermore, members of the Section attend the meetings of the Euro-Latin America Parliamentary Assembly, where it organises civil society hearings with contribute to the work of the Assembly.

The Section has developed formal relations with the Mercosur Economic and Social Consultative Forum, the Consultative Committee of the Central American Integration System and the Cariforum civil society organisations. These relations have been enhanced by the joint monitoring of the Association Agreements or Free Trade Agreements negotiated by the EU with these regions, which have brought about the setting-up of either Domestic Advisory Groups or Consultative Committees. The most recent example is the launching of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee in 2016.

- **BRAZIL**

Mandated by the EU-Brazil Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 2008, and following the creation of a Strategic Partnership between the EU and Brazil, a civil society round table between the EESC and the Brazilian Council for Economic and Social Development (CDES) was created, in 2009. The round table meets twice per year and presents its conclusions to the annual EU Brazil Summits.

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8th Meeting of EU, Latin American and Caribbean civil society organisations, Brussels, 11-12 March 2015, chaired by Mr Zufiaur, President of the REX Section

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Section has set up a follow-up committee on international trade to monitor multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations and voice the EESC's position on the agreements which are negotiated. Section members also attend the annual WTO conference, as part of the delegation of the European Union, as civil society advisers.

In close contact with its third-country partners, the Section puts forward civil society's point of view on issues such as sustainable development, labour and environmental standards and civil society participation in implementing trade

agreements. The EESC's participation in formally established joint civil society bodies under trade agreements, as well as its involvement in sustainability impact assessments, are two important priorities for the Section in the area of trade.

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TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

Since 2015, the Transatlantic Relations follow-up Committee monitors relations with Canada and the USA, focussing mainly on the negotiations of CETA and TTIP. It keeps regular contacts with civil society from both countries and holds seminars and conferences that reflect on specific aspects of the negotiations.

For more information about the work of the Section for External Relation, please visit <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.rex-section>



European Economic and Social Committee

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