



The European Economic and Social Committee in 2040

Critical Variables and Four Scenarios

Final Report

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Abstract

Based on the evaluation of previous research and other documents, stakeholder interviews and consultation as well as an online survey, this report drafts possible futures of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

The EESC is confronted with multiple challenges, including an uncertain future relevance of the EU and acceptance of the “Project Europe” by citizens, socioeconomic transformation processes and new participation possibilities as well as a changed structure of civil society. Against this, questions of representation and legitimacy as well as of impact and added value of the Committee must be asked. In this context, there are two fundamental variables for the future development of the EESC: First, there is the question of “Who will be involved / represented?” and second, “What will be the EESC's core tasks, what is its specific added value?”.

For the EESC in 2040, four scenarios developed within this study present different possible pathways. While the first scenario describes the erosion of the EESC’s legitimacy, three others put forward possible choices for the future identity of the EESC focusing on “Assessment and Foresight”, becoming the “Agora of Civil Society” or a “Coreper’ of Social Partnership”. The scenarios are an invitation to dialogue; to reach an understanding with others about what will be of decisive importance for the future of EESC.

In the coming years, the EESC – and many other stakeholders – have to set the course so that it can continue to be a relevant building block of the European house in 2040 deciding on involvement, scope, identity and aspirations, structure and working formats, equipment and use of resources.

Executive summary

Multiple challenges lie ahead for the EESC. More and more areas of life are significantly shaped by EU legislation while at the same time citizens have become more distanced and sceptical towards the EU institutions. Furthermore, the EU has become much more heterogeneous leading to diverging challenges and interests instead of convergence. In the framework of an uncertain future where it is not known whether the future relevance of the EU will be increasing or declining or if trends of re-nationalisation and conflict, the deepening of the integration process or further enlargement rounds will happen the questions of representation and legitimacy as well as of impact and added value of the EESC have to be asked.

In terms of the future of the European integration process, resilience, orientation and new directions are needed, with trust and participation among the key currencies of success. And there are various possible concepts of participation, of core functions and working structures of the EESC that might – one way or another – contribute to the future path of the “Project Europe”. Against socioeconomic transformation processes and social coherence within and between the societies of the Member States as well as increasing ecological and economic pressures and geopolitical tensions combined with a declined impact of conventional employment and labour relations, emerging issues, initiatives and organisations of civil society in the EU Member States, the EESC finds itself confronted with the need to change and make choices in relation to several possible pathways to do so.

In this context, two fundamental variables for the development of the EESC over the next two decades have been identified throughout the analysis of research literature, stakeholder interview, an online survey and a workshop with the Workers’ Group are used to structure the future space and arrive at clearly distinguishable scenarios:

1. “Who will be involved / represented?”

What concept of civil society underlies the EESC's work and which organisations and initiatives will be involved and how? Is it a focussed concept of involvement and topics or will there be a broader range of actors and issues, which will be addressed by the EESC? This question is essential for the future input legitimacy of the EESC.

2. “What will be the EESC's core tasks, what is its specific added value?”

Which function of the EESC will be dominant in the future, advice and expertise or political influence on the legislation and policies of the European Union? This question will be essential for the future output legitimacy of the EESC.

Considering these questions and variables, the following four scenarios for possible futures have been developed:

- **Scenario 1: Creeping Decline**

While the EESC remains an advisory body, this role and legitimacy is eroding. In practice, there is little relevance, resonance and involvement due to a too narrow (out-dated) concept of Civil Society and other factors. The “routine of compromise” leads all too often to lowest common denominator opinions with little profile and innovative impulses. Despite ambitious initiatives of engaged members the EESC is not succeeding to overcome the lack of proper recognition by other institutions, the failure

to create and demonstrate added value, the decreasing acknowledgement of civil society organisations in most Member States, budget restraints and a general lack of reform. Eventually, by 2040, the EESC does not exist anymore – its heritage is taken over by a small advisory group under the roof of the European Parliament and different consultation and participatory formats managed by the European Commission.

- **Scenario 2: Assessment and Foresight**

The EESC is substantially developing its profile towards an advisory body focusing on comprehensive impact assessments of EU legislation and policies as well as an acknowledged European centre of excellence for participatory foresight and go-to resource for developing democratically rooted solutions to long-term challenges and opportunities. Essential for this is a broader concept of civil society, which addresses and includes many more stakeholder groups. Another ingredient for success is the overcoming of “silo structures and thinking” to tackle the interconnected challenges in turbulent times. The establishment of long-term perspectives as well as horizontal networking and mutual learning processes between civil society organisations in Europe (and beyond) complement the “brand core” of the EESC.

- **Scenario 3: Agora of Civil Society**

The EESC focuses on political participation and influence on EU legislation and policies through a broad involvement of the organised civil society as well as ad hoc initiatives and new movements and emerging issues. Many (existing and new) instruments and approaches for a lively and participatory participation culture are bundled under the umbrella of the EESC, which helps to reduce the gap that many EU citizens have so far felt between the EU as a political arena and their daily lives. In the year 2040, the EESC is primarily a facilitator to make manifold civil society initiatives and concerns heard and to strengthen their influence on EU policies and legislation. The EESC's members, activities and contact points in the Member States serve as civil society's "slip road to EU policymaking". One effect of this development is that the range of topics dealt with is now much broader and more diverse.

- **Scenario 4: 'Coreper' of Social Partnership**

The political impact of the EESC as a core arena to bargain for compromise between important stakeholders to manage the economic and other crises and transitions at EU level is strengthened. This is crucial because in the future more issues concerning the shaping of the world of work and social cohesion (which are today still in the domain of the Member States) will be negotiated and regulated within the framework of EU policies. Involvement of the EESC is focussed on important business/employer organisations and trade unions, supplemented by other influential sustainability and 'just transition' organisations. Thus, the EESC is further developed as a solid base and organisational structure for a coherent and impactful social partnership on EU level. Furthermore, it also serves as a catalyst for Europeanisation of national unions and employer organisations.

In the coming years, the EESC – and many other stakeholders – must set the course so that it can continue to be a relevant building block of the European house in 2040. Critical decisions must be taken to shape the future of the EESC regarding, involvement, scope, identity and aspirations, structure and working formats and equipment and use of resources. In this context, answers to the following questions have to be found:

- Who will be represented by the EESC and how can participation be designed?
- What topics will the EESC treat and focus on?

- Does the EESC want to be a stronger political body, or does it prefer to be an advisory body providing expertise?
- Will the EESC's work be focused on Brussels, or will it engage more in a network within Member States "going local"? And how can desk work, moderation, communication, and networking activities be strengthened and, where necessary, appropriately remunerated?
- Where should the resources (people, time and finances) be used sensibly to reach a stable resource situation guaranteeing good effectiveness?

A time horizon of two decades makes it possible to look at more far-reaching possible changes. Each of the four scenarios has its – albeit not evenly distributed – bright and dark sides, its specific challenges and opportunities. They should be understood as an invitation to dialogue; to reach an understanding with others about what will be of decisive importance for the future of EESC – about what kind of future we would like to have for this institution created more than 60 years ago; and how action and decisions we take today might fit in the broader picture. In this sense, scenario building is a tool for orientation, for consideration, for exchange with others – and for action. The more of the relevant stakeholders – with their different perspectives, aims and possibilities to act – are involved in this dialogue, the better.

1. Background, objectives and methodology of the study

1.1 Background and objectives of the study

wmp consult, together with the Institute for Prospective Analyses (IPA) have been contracted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to elaborate the foresight study "*EESC Scenario 2040 - Study on the future role of the EESC and the Workers' Group*" (Contract No. EESC/FSA/06/2021/34293). The study has been requested by the EESC Workers' Group and is conducted for the Foresight, Studies and Policy Assessment Unit of the EESC.

The EESC was set up (as the ESC) already in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome, as an EU institution to involve economic and social interest groups in the establishment of the common market and to provide an institutional structure for briefing the European Commission and the Council of Ministers on European Community issues. The EESC's role was reinforced by the Single European Act in 1986 and the Treaties of Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997), Nice (2000), and Lisbon (2007).

Over time, the number of issues and thematic areas the EESC deals with has increased significantly. At the same time, its influence and resources have not followed suit. More recently, several internal issues within the Committee as well as other developments such as the enhanced use of (digital) consultation methods directly involving citizens and challenges to the European project by anti-democratic tendencies have led to disruptions in work processes and decision-making activities of the EESC as well as to a perceived decline in the reputation of the EESC.

Against these developments, but also in the light of the overlapping of current fundamental social, economic and political challenges such as the COVID-19 crisis highlighting existing social inequalities, climate change and decarbonisation or the war in Ukraine and their related social and economic impact, there is a strong need to rethink both the past experience as well as future perspectives and scenarios of the EESC as regards its role and position as a European consultative and representative body. Such a reflection and possible future scenarios should also consider the uncertain future of security and foreign relations in Europe. In this context, workers' involvement, working and employment conditions are particularly important. Likewise, the challenges faced by the Committee concern especially the Workers' Group, as representatives of millions of workers and part of the social dialogue process at the core of the European social market economy system.

The main objectives of the study have been the following:

1. First, evaluating the current state of play and gather data and information from previous research as well as stakeholder assessments on the current role of the EESC in the light of current and future challenges.
2. Secondly, and based on this as well as stakeholder consultation to elaborate a set of possible future scenarios and role models of the EESC by 2040, with a view of its consultative role as representing organised civil society and a key instrument of participatory democracy in the European Union.
3. Third, to reflect on the impacts of the different scenarios on the influence and role of the EESC within the EU policy-making system, paying particular attention to the role of the Workers' Group and the context of institutionalised social dialogue within the EU.

1.2 Methodology and research tasks

The study started in January 2022 and was implemented in close cooperation with the secretariat of the Workers' Group of the EESC throughout 2022.

The research approach consisted of a mix of methodological tools including a comprehensive literature review, more than 20 interviews with stakeholders from all three groups of the EESC as well as from other EU institutions and social partner organisations¹ (between April and July 2022) and an online survey targeting a broader (non-representative) sample of the target groups carried out between May and July 2022 with 50 complete answers and an additional of 14 partly completed responses.

In addition to these different modes of qualitative data and information gathering, the authors of this study moderated a session and exchange on interim results of the research and possible future scenarios of the EESC in a workshop that was organised by the Workers' Group in May 2022. This workshop addressed the results, recommendations and follow-up measures of the Conference on the Future of Europe from the perspective of the EESC and was attended by more than 80 participants and provided valuable additional input for the research team.²

1.3 Structure of this report

This report summarises key results of the research and presents future scenarios and “role models” deriving from the study as well as conclusions for the EESC and the Workers' Group for further exchange on the scenarios and how to work with them.

The following chapter 2 provides a summary of main findings from the review of literature structured along the key aspects of the evolution of the EESC over time, including challenges as regards influence, impacts and legitimacy.

Chapters 3 and 4 summarise findings as arising from stakeholder interviews and survey as well as the workshop of the EESC Group II. The focus here is on relevance, challenges and strengths of the EESC as well as suggestions for the future of the Workers' Group and the EESC to enhance and strengthen the role of the Committee in the context of the multiple challenges Europe and the European institutions are facing.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to possible futures of the EESC and “role models” as regards its consultative and other roles describing four different scenarios and drawing conclusions. In Chapter 6, the authors of the study present a number of condensed conclusions and more general recommendations for the future of the EESC deriving from the findings presented before.

¹ EESC Groups I, II and III, EESC administration staff as well as (few) former EESC members, EU Commission, European Parliament, CoR as well as representatives of European cross-industry and sectoral trade union and employer organisations.

² *Future of Europe: Recommendations and follow-up. What role for the EESC?*, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/future-europe-recommendations-and-follow-what-role-eesc>

2. The EESC in literature and research

In the context of the research more than 40 documents, study or research reports or papers as well as relevant publications or documents of EU institutions have been evaluated based on a structured mapping and review process. The list of sources is also included in the bibliographic annex of this report.

Existing literature mainly focuses on the functioning and mission of the EESC and their evolution over time and much less on its influence and impact on EU decision making, legislation and policy. Key results of the review are summarized in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Evolution of the EESC over time as described in literature

The EESC is one of two consultative committees and was established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The idea was to consider consistently the expertise as well as interests of the social partners in the context of economic decision making (Jeffrey 2006). Apart from the acquisition of the right of initiative in 1974 that led to more opinions published on a broader range of topics (Walli 2020), the EESC has undergone few changes. The enlargement of its fields of competence is visible, but it is linked to that of the European Union: a majority of the new areas integrated are subject to consultation of the EESC. However, different Treaties have slightly changed the position of the EESC as the following table 1 shows:

Table 1: Constitutional change in the EU and its impact on the EESC

Year	Act/Treaty	Changes relevant to the EESC
1987	Single European Act	Strengthening of the Parliament Introduction of new policy areas (such as economic and social cohesion, research and technological development, and the environment, in which the EESC also acquired consultation rights)
1992	Treaty of Maastricht	Inscription of right of initiative into primary law Meeting on its own initiative Budgetary and administrative autonomy Right to define its own Rules of Procedure Deadline set by Council or Commission of at least 1 month Adaptation of the composition to EU 12 Creation of the CoR Introduction of new policy areas, such as health care, consumer protection, trans-European networks, industry and social provisions in the social protocol
1999	Treaty of Amsterdam	Mandatory referral to the CoR on new topics regarding the enlargement including employment (considered to be at the heart of the EESC's function) Extension of the field of expertise of the CoR Introduction of ability of the European Parliament to refer to the EESC Extension of the EESC's sphere of activity, especially in the social field
2003	Treaty of Nice	Limiting the number of members of the EESC to 350 Mentioning the notion of "civil society" when defining the composition of the EESC
2009	Treaty of Lisbon	Confirming and reinforcing the notion of "civil society" Reinforcing the statute of assembly of experts Prolonging the mandate to 5 years in accordance with the mandate of the members of the Parliament

Sources: EPRS 2020, Guichet 2013 (p. 59-62), Kohler-Koch 2009, Walli 2020, Westlake 2009

Autonomy of the EESC has increased over the years and its scope regarding topics treated has broadened (Westlake 2009; EPRS 2020). In addition, interinstitutional agreements have had an impact on the EESC's identity. The protocol on cooperation between the European Commission and the Economic and Social Committee first agreed on in 2001 as well as the interinstitutional cooperation agreement of 2014 between the European Parliament, the EESC and the CoR built stable and sustainable relations with organised European civil society and enhanced its role in participatory democracy. While the first agreement gave the EESC the possibility to be involved at an earlier stage in the decision-making process, the second tried to improve the involvement of civil society organisations therein also considering ex post effects on the people (Dialer 2015; EESC 2003; Ferri 2013; Walli 2020). Pérez-Solórzano Borragán/Smismans (2007) estimate that EU enlargement had little effect on the functioning of the EESC, however, representing some organisational challenges regarding, for example the timely delivery of documents as these had to be translated to more languages.

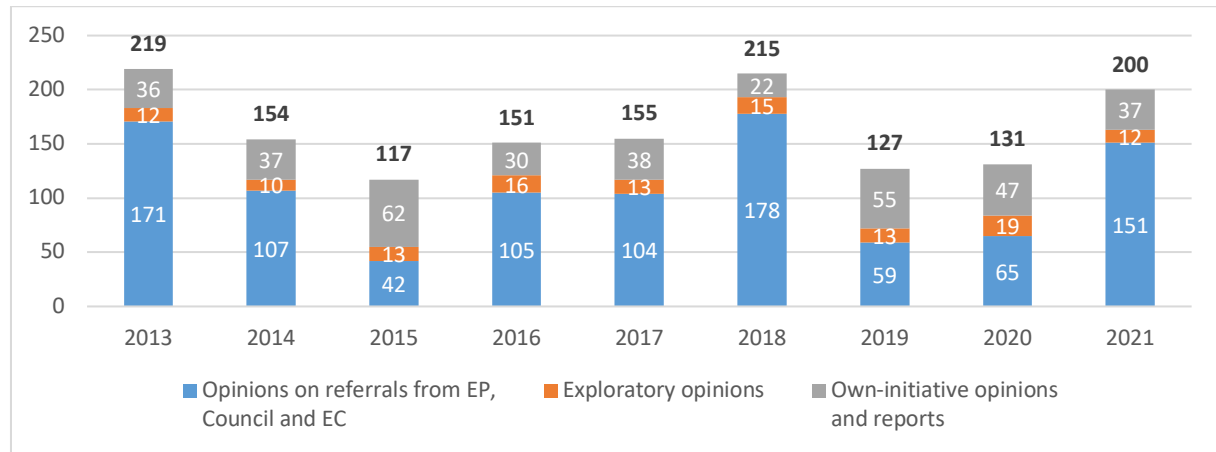
In addition, the EESC has become more and more involved in different topics including consultation on industrial change setting up a Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI) in 2002, international relations and foreign policy also operating directly in third countries by developing dialogue with representatives of their socio occupational organisations and seeking to develop consultative structures and to strengthen civil society in these countries (EESC 2003; Guichet 2013) and establishing stable relations with civil society representatives of the EU's partner countries within joint consultative committees, monitoring committees and discussion forums (Walli 2020), observation of (market) trends with the Observatory of the Digital Transition and the Single Market (DSMO) since 1994 (then named Single Market Observatory), the Labour Market Observatory (LMO) since 2007 and the Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) since 2006 which work under the supervision and oversight of the INT/TEN sections, the SOC Section and the NAT Section respectively (EPRS 2020).

The EESC fulfils the advisory role assigned to it by the EU Treaties by issuing opinions either requested by another EU institution or adopted on the Committee's own initiative. Furthermore, the Commission, Council or Parliament may ask the EESC to reflect and make suggestions on a particular topic, which may eventually lead to a legislative proposal; these are the EESC's exploratory opinions, which are mostly requested by the rotating EU Council presidencies. For example, the Council presidency held by Portugal (January-June 2021) requested seven exploratory opinions from the EESC (EESC 2020b). The Slovenia Council presidency (July-December 2021) requested five (EESC 2021c). The French presidency (January-June 2022) requested seven (EESC 2021b) and the Czech (July-December 2022) eight (EESC 2022c).

According to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure, 'the Committee may, on a proposal from the bureau, decide to prepare an information report with a view to examining any question pertaining to the policies of the European Union and their possible developments'. With revised rules of procedure that came into effect on 20 May 2022, policy evaluations can now take two forms: opinions (including recommendations) and the newly introduced evaluation reports (providing factual assessments). According to Rule 14 "evaluation of policies shall be understood as ex post evaluations, concerning policies or legal instruments of the European Union which are already being implemented". The report must be requested by a European institution (Rule 48, RoP) (EESC 2022b).

Regarding output, between 2013 and 2021, the EESC issued an average of 163 opinions and information reports a year. In 2021, the EESC adopted 200 opinions and reports comprising 151 referrals, 28 own-initiative opinions, 12 exploratory opinions and 9 other opinions and reports.

Figure 1: Number of opinions and reports issued by the EESC 2013 to 2021



Sources: EESC 2018; EESC 2022a

As Figure 1 shows, the number of exploratory and own-initiative opinions has remained relatively stable since 2013 while there has been a slight decline in the number of opinions on referrals from European Parliament, Council and European Commission.

At first, the membership structure of the EESC reflected the core issues of the European Union at the time when the EESC was established, namely agriculture, industry and labour. With the EU becoming more invested in economic, social and political questions as well the service economy gaining in importance, also EESC membership reflected these developments more and more involving members from consultancy, entrepreneurship, finance, science, or (intellectual) professional occupations including in the Workers' Group for example trade unions representing teachers, bank workers and executives (Fonseca 2007).

Comparing mandates 2010-2015, 2015-2020 and 2020-2025, the number of members with the EESC rose from 344 to 350 before and fell to 326 after Brexit reaching 329 during the last mandate. The renewal rate has increased over the three mandates from 30% to 40.3% reaching 41.6% in the mandate beginning in 2020. The rate of new members with the EESC is higher than in the CoR (31%) but lower than in the European Parliament (58.5%). Average age of EESC members remains stable (55-56 years) While the share of women among members has increased over the last three mandates from 24.7% to 27.30% (after Brexit) reaching 32.8% in 2020, gender balance has not been reached. A better balance can be stated for the leading positions president, vice-presidents, presidents of the groups, questors of the groups and the heads of each delegation where the share of women was 42.1% for the 2015-2020 mandate. While in 2010-2015 25 out of 27 delegations had a higher percentage of men than women, the number decreased to 23 in 2015-2020, reaching 19 in 2020-2025. Regarding the three Groups, during the mandate 2020-2025 Group II has the highest share of women (38%), followed by Group III (32.2%) and Group I (28.3%) (EESC 2021a).

While the proportion of female members of the EESC has increased, the proportion of women rapporteurs stagnates at around 20% indicating that barriers for women to become rapporteur still exist and according to Kaikkonen and Stevens (2021) may even have grown stronger. In six of the seven sections, the proportion of female rapporteurs is lower than the proportion of female members with the only exception being the REX section (Kaikkonen/Stevens 2021).

The groups are gradually increasing their weight within the Committee. Their meetings have multiplied and they have become places of thematic debates also enhancing group culture. The groups develop their own communication. This requires important means and the secretariats of the groups have been enlarged and their role changed as they now also do political work in addition to administrative tasks (Guichet 2013, p. 107/108).

2.2 The influence and legitimacy of the EESC as seen in literature

Literature on the EESC has highlighted several strengths of the EESC and areas where it may exert an influence on EU policies and legislation. Several authors estimate that the participation of various interest groups as provided by the EESC has played an important role in the European integration process since the beginning, also as a balance to the strong interests of economic actors and economic policy objectives (Smismans 2000; Guichet 2013; EPRS 2020) involving all the players in civil society, including other organisations in addition to the social partners (EESC 2003). In this context, it is put forward that the EESC has consistently contributed to the strengthening of civil dialogue in Europe and to the debate and initiatives on participatory democracy in the EU (EPRS 2020), also based on its members' close connection to national and local organisations (Eisele 2008).

Despite the fact that the EESC as a consultative committee has no veto power and limited political influence and lacks formal competencies to influence EU secondary law directly (Hönnige/Panke 2016), it still has “soft influence” (Westlake 2009) for example inspiring parliamentary staff to draft amendments and identifying possible pitfalls and solutions of legislative proposals making use of own and external expertise and is considered “an attractive arena for leaders in civil society, including those representing employers' associations and labour unions” due to “its privileged access to the core EU institutions” (Uhlin/Arvidson 2022, p. 7). For Uhlin and Arvidson (2022) also consensus presents an added value compared to ETUC or BusinessEurope and the “basis for the EESC identity”. Members of the EESC interviewed for their study estimated that consensus gives the EESC some policy influence (Uhlin/Arvidson 2022) (for positive and negative considerations of the consensus-principle see chapters 3.2. and 3.3. of this report).

Westlake (2009) finds that the EESC may be effective when approaching the European Commission to influence EU proposals for directives or regulations before submitting to the EP and the Council of Ministers (Westlake 2009). Also, Panke (2019) supports the argument of the EESC having an impact and legitimacy representing additional types of interests in the multilevel system and giving in-depth and well-funded opinions considering a broader variety of aspects than lobbyist and other individual interest groups (Panke 2019).

On the contrary, literature also describes limits and challenges to the influence and legitimacy of the EESC. The extent and importance of the influence of the EESC on the positions of both the European Parliament and the Council as well as EU policies is not constant but rather varies considerably from

case to case (Panke et al. 2015). While Smismans (2000) estimates that in the first years after the establishment of the EESC, its opinions had more influence than those of the Assembly, the predecessor of the European Parliament. However, this influence diminished when the European Parliament has been strengthened over time. The acquisition of the right of initiative has moderately changed the role of the EESC in the European political system. However, the real benefit of the right depends on the willingness of decision makers to listen to initiatives (Guichet 2013).

As summed up by Panke (2019), four major challenges for the EESC regarding its influence on EU decision-making and legislation have been identified in literature: inefficient decision-making due to members' time constraints and limited administrative support also reducing quality and innovative potential of opinions, concurrence of highly specialised and often more constructive lobbyists (see for example CIVITAS 2015; Jeffrey 2006; Eisele 2008) high workload of addressees leading them to not even read the EESC's opinions and the inability of the addressees to change their positions even if they wanted as they are bound to instructions, for example from the responsible line ministry back home in case of the Council of Ministers.

Furthermore, especially against the aim of the EESC to provide a bridge between Civil Society and the EU level, its representativity is an issue often discussed in literature. While Westlake (2009) sees positive effects of EU enlargements in 1995, 2004 and 2007 positively affecting age structure and gender balance, Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Smismans (2007) considered that weak organisational features of civil society in the new Member States has harmed representativeness due to the fact that civil society organisations in these countries are still weak compared to their counterparts in the older Member States reflected in low levels of organisational membership, low levels of participation in associational life, low levels of trust in organised civil society organisations and limited de facto consultative procedures. Also, members from the new Member States not always had organisations behind them.

Representativity was also questioned by Jeffrey (2006), Fonseca (2007) and Guichet (2013), the latter highlighting that some important civil society organisations, such as Amnesty International, are not direct members of the EESC. Irigoien Domínguez (2019) and Uhlin and Arvidson (2022) state that gender imbalance also gives way to be concerned about legitimacy. Furthermore, Johannson, Uhlin and Arvidson (2021) stated that membership composition does not keep up with changes in European societies as access to the EESC continues to be restricted to established organised forms of interests.

Also, visibility and trust are seen as major challenges (Eisele 2008). Indeed, a 2019 Eurobarometer survey has shown that compared to other EU institutions, the EESC is among the least known and least trusted EU institutions. Only the Committee of Regions (CoR) is less known and less trusted than the EESC. This lack of awareness translates also into a lack of trust in the EESC who is positioned second last on this aspect (European Commission 2019). Still, the EESC has been addressing this issue since 2010, when a communication strategy for the year 2010 to 2015 was established, with implementation overseen by the communication group, designed to ensure that the Committee's work is better known, not only among the institutions but also among civil society organisations at large. A review of the strategy was carried out mid-term in 2013 resulted in the adoption of key recommendations and a subsequent action plan to implement them by the Communication Group also building the basis for a new strategy for the years 2016-2020 (EESC 2016). An evaluation of this strategy found in 2021 that the EESC should focus more on online publications providing a clear

message not tackling internal procedures which are not interesting for the public (Kantar Public 2021). In 2022, based on the evaluation of the previous strategy, a new strategy (yet to be adopted) was designed prioritizing publication channels and topics.

Several suggestions to enhance the influence of the EESC have been put forward in literature including prioritisation of its work focusing on areas where it may have an influence (Westlake 2009, Panke et al. 2015), reconsidering national nomination procedures adapting it to societal change and to the diversification of civil society organisations (Smismans 2000), improved motivation of members to be more proactive (Panke et al. 2015) and the adoption and mainstreaming of gender equality and diversity policies (Irigoien Dominguez 2019).

Future roles mentioned in literature are the role of a facilitator and informed channel between the European Commission and organised civil society to improve stakeholder consultation processes, for example supporting civil society organisations in online consultation processes by providing technical and subject-matter information, promoting the use of digital tools as a decision-making method within the organisations, facilitating and moderating the deliberative process, agenda setting and monitoring the Commission's feedback process to enhance accessibility, representativeness as well as feedback and impact of online public consultation processes (Lironi/Peta 2017) or as an impact assessment body (Guichet 2013; Panke et al. 2015).

Panke et al. (2015, p.173) suggest that for prioritised issues the Committee “should abandon the internal consensus-principle and work towards the development of precise, substantial and constructive proposals for changes in the legislative act at stake rather than providing opinions that reflect agreements of the lowest common denominator from all consultative committee members”. Petrašević and Duić (2016) even suggest merging the two committees to save costs. If effectiveness were not to be improved, Petrašević and Duić (2016) advocate for their abolishment.

In the following chapter we provide a summary and analysis of the research results gathered by stakeholder interviews, online survey and a workshop held with members of the workers' group regarding relevance, strengths, and challenges of the EESC including suggestions on how to overcome them made by interview partners.

3. Relevance, challenges, and strengths of the EESC: What stakeholders think

During interviews, survey and workshop, participants and respondents generally accorded a high relevance to the EESC's objectives and missions (see chapter 3.1). However, especially interview partners (more than survey respondents) judged that its capability to adapt to changes has been and remains limited. Challenges regarding influence and legitimacy of the EESC named in literature such as the attitude and ability of EU institutions to take into consideration the EESC's opinions, representativity and composition of the EESC, visibility and trust also were mentioned in interviews and survey complemented by more detailed considerations on quality and impact of the EESC's opinions (see chapter 3.2.) as well as examples for strengths and successful initiatives of the EESC (see chapter 3.3.). For further information on how interview partners and survey respondents expect challenges and strengths to have an impact on the future of the EESC, see chapter 4.2 and additional material in Annex II).

3.1 High relevance of the EESC's objectives and missions

All interview partners stated that, in general, the three missions (advisory function in EU decision making, representing civil society, promotion of participatory democracy) are still relevant today. In recent years, a general trend and a change of perspective has taken place in the EU. Authoritarian traits have been strengthened. The EU institutions have recognized the need to strengthen public confidence for the security and well-being of the people. Against this background, most interview partners argued that it is even more important to have an EESC.

The advisory role in EU policy and legislation was often cited as a core function by interview partners and participants to the online. Also, participants in the workshop highlighted that the advisory mission is the most visible one with the publication of opinions and reports. 57 out of the 60 participants to the online survey who answered the question (95%) stated that this function is still (highly) relevant. Interview partners explained that this institutional role is particularly relevant in ensuring that social aspects such as worker and consumer protection are considered. As EU legislation has an increasingly direct impact on people's lives, it is even more important to bring in the realities of the people affected. This will be of great importance for the quality and acceptance of European policies in the future.

Also, the basic idea of the EESC representing civil society, as a bridge between the EU level and what is happening on the ground, is still relevant and represents a great added value according to interview partners. The online survey showed that 57 out of 60 participants to the online survey who answered the question (95 %) stated that this function is still relevant.

From the interview partners' opinion, the promotion of participatory democracy and of the values of the European integration is even more important than 10-15 years ago in view of the challenges to the rule of law and freedom of speech and choice. Due to a more pluralistic society and the 2004 enlargement, interpretations of what the values are and how they must be applied have broadened. Democracy is an important topic in the whole EU. In the closing of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) the importance of participatory democracy was expressly mentioned combined with an enhanced role of the EESC. Still, some interview partners mentioned that the role of the EESC in participatory democracy is not very visible. Also, with 54 out of 60 (90%) survey participants answering the question, stated that this third mission was relevant.

It needs to be mentioned that despite the promotion of participatory democracy and European values being a self-declared mission of the EESC, this aspect has also been identified as a challenge. During the Group II workshop some participants raised the concern that not all Committee members are firmly committed to European values.

While the three missions are still relevant today, interview partners, survey and workshop participants were asked to consider the question how the EESC can implement and develop them as the world has changed but the Committee is still the same faced with challenges as described in the following paragraphs.

3.2 Challenges regarding adaptation to a changing framework and impact and influence of the EESC

According to interview partners, the EESC has only been able to adapt to the changes partially and slowly in the EU policy and in the political and socio-economic situation in the EU, the EESC is still perceived by interview partners as a very static organisation that has evolved but not enough, in terms of structure, weight and place in institutional setup. Nevertheless, there has been some adaptation regarding integration of relatively new issues like environmental aspects, involvement of more members that are still actively involved in their national organisations and own initiatives engaging civil society (for example social relations, circular economy and access to energy). The EESC also is considered by interview partners to capture topics which are broader than the legislative consultation, taking up an additional task carrying out evaluations on how EU legislation works on the ground in a selected number of Member States. They also highlighted that the EESC undertook an extremely fast change from a physical to a virtual body induced by the pandemic.

On the contrary, survey participants have a more positive impression of the EESC's ability to adapt to changes. 27% (15 out of 56 answers) stated that it has been able to adapt, and an additional 43% (24 out of 56 answers) believed this is at least partially the case. Still, adaptation is not always perceived in the interest of workers and does not seem to be based on a long-term strategy. Furthermore, the 2008 and COVID crises and the war in Ukraine have put serious obstacles to this adaptation. In addition to the intrinsic weakness of "only" being a consultative body, several factors have been named by interview partners that lead to a reduced impact and influence of the EESC.

As put forward in literature (Smismans 2000; Guichet 2013, see also chapter 2.2), the attitude and ability of EU institutions to take into consideration the EESC's opinions is also judged an important factor affecting impact and influence of the EESC. Other EU institutions, the European Parliament and Commission but especially the Council, not always seem to take the EESC seriously, and an exact definition of the advisory function is missing from the Treaties. Apart from the presidencies requesting the EESC to do exploratory opinions, the Council does not involve the EESC so much. To overcome these challenges, interview partners and survey respondents suggested that the EESC should enhance its relationship with other EU institutions reaching out to stakeholders, for example directly contacting the counterparts at the European Parliament or the CoR or organising public events together), setting up regular joint study groups between EESC and CoR to jointly discuss important issues or exploring the possibility for the European Parliament to assign the EESC specific tasks to be performed to complement the legislative making process. Also, members of the EESC should be better informed at which meetings of other institutions there is a place at the table for them. Interview partners also

highlighted that an actual dialogue at discussion events with commissioners and MEPs should be guaranteed by allowing for questions to be asked and not only giving lectures without any real exchange. Synchronizing EESC sessions with those of the Commission or Parliament and meeting more frequently also may contribute to work better with the other EU institutions. Cooperation with the European Parliament and the European Commission was also recommended by interview partners through the organisation of flagship events (as it is the case for the CoR collaborating with DG Regio on the organisation of the “week of regions and cities”). In addition, to ensure a fluid relationship with the key institutions, the EESC president should regularly exchange with the president of the European Commission and of the European Parliament to formally discuss a common agenda. Also, interview partners suggested that every Vice President of the EESC should have a formal point of contact of the same category in the European parliament and in the European Commission. One further suggestion made by interview partners was to always invite at least one high standing Presidency representative - either a Minister or the respective MS Ambassador in Brussels – and the CoR President or his/her high representative to the EESC Plenaries to properly share the views.

Interview partners also noted that while the peak level social partners organisations (ETUC, BusinessEurope, SMEunited and SGI Europe) in recent years have gained a stronger involvement at highest EU policy level (e.g., namely through the annual tripartite social summit), this is not the case for the EESC so far.

As already highlighted in literature (see chapter 2.2.), representativeness and composition of the EESC also is a major concern for most interview partners and survey respondents. As highlighted by them, gender representation in the EESC is very imbalanced. Also, younger members are underrepresented. The EESC does not fully represent civil society, and only partly organised civil society. New social movements have hardly any access, which results in a legitimacy problem according to interview partners. Interview partners also noted that the EESC needs to adapt to changes in the linkage between EU institutions and civil society and national or transnational organisations and institutions such as online consultations. Lobbyism plays a more important role and consultative and legislative power of Social Dialogue was guaranteed by the Maastricht Protocol and the Amsterdam Treaty in the 1990s. While some interview partners put forward that formal EESC positions might have more weight than single trade union positions, others highlighted that social partners do not need the EESC to present them.

As highlighted in literature (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Smismans 2007, see also chapter 2.2) with the Eastern enlargement of the EU, additional members joined the EESC from national contexts that lack traditions of autonomous social dialogue and collective bargaining. In addition to this aspect, interview partners also highlighted that trade union and employer organisations in many EU Member States are facing an erosion of membership strength as well as political influence. Additional challenges of organised labour and business emerge from changing economic reality and their impact on the labour market, e.g., new forms of work like platform work and other more flexible forms of working. Such trends have also an impact on the EESC and its representativeness. According to interview partners, against a decrease in collective bargaining and social partner representativeness, the EESC must question if they are still representing the reality.

Interview partners also found it problematic that there are as many different processes of nomination of EESC members and different concepts of civil society organisations as there are Member States. To

them it is not always clear if members really represent their economic or social sector or if they only state their personal view. In addition, there is a paradox of the members being suggested by their national organisation and the obligation to decide independently, as highlighted during the workshop. As put forward in literature, also motivation of members and how they see their role is seen as an important factor regarding impact and influence of the EESC by interview partners. Remuneration of members (or the lack of it) as well as restraints in time and resources available have been mentioned by interview partners in this context.

To enhance representativity and improve the relationship between members and national background, interview partners suggested to involve more members who are still active in their national organisations, to develop a mechanism guaranteeing feedback into and from the organisations of the members of the EESC. The work of the members should be more closely tied to the national level. Creating a standard process for nomination members to guarantee that members come from representative democratic organisations, establishing quotas (regarding gender, age, ...) for EESC membership and convincing the organisations and the governments to appoint members who have enough available time to really get involved were further suggestions put forward by interview partners.

Furthermore, visibility and trust, already highlighted as major issues in literature, were named by interview partners and survey respondents as aspects negatively affecting impact and influence of the EESC. Interview partners mentioned the lack of communication to be a weakness that only recently has been addressed by action such as designing a new communication strategy (see chapter 2.2). Interview partners suggested that mission statements should be less vague in order for citizens to understand what the EESC does and why it exists. Also, the concept of civil society should be defined more clearly. To enhance visibility of activities and outputs, interview partners and survey respondents suggested to establish a culture of follow-up and to enhance communication, for example by maintaining contacts with other EU institutions at an early stage of the elaboration process of an opinion, actively promoting and presenting opinions, clearly defining target groups and adapting language and expressions, and giving common tools and more opportunities to the members to present their work.

When it comes to quality and impact of the EESC's opinions, in general, interview partners considered opinions to be of added value. However, opinions also were considered to be sometimes not relevant, too vague, without concrete proposals and therefore not taken seriously by policy makers. In this context, consensus is considered by some interview partners to make it difficult to introduce completely new ideas leading to the opinions being too soft and not "having teeth" while others estimate, on the contrary that consensus is a strength of the EESC (see chapter 3.3). In addition to this erosion of social partnership, positions of social partners are more and more in conflict, according to interview partners also leading to a growing gap between Group I and II within the EESC making consensus difficult to reach. From their point of view, polarization and confrontation between employers and trade unions within the EESC increases, especially in the socio-political area.

From the interview partners' point of view, regarding the enhancement of quality of activities and output, purely technical opinions should be avoided. Interview partners also mentioned that the way opinions are presented should be changed. Conclusions and recommendations should be separated. This could give a little extra added value to opinions. To present clear opinions with clear messages is

important from their point of view. The EESC should be more coherent on how to approach the drafting of any opinion. Guidelines are needed to present information in a shorter, sharper and more concrete way. When it comes to content, organising of site visits and fact-finding missions, interviews and meetings with local civil society organisation getting a feeling for the topic on the ground was judged useful by interview partners to enhance quality of opinions. Also, increasing the number of participants in study groups and enhancing flexibility, for example, giving the groups the possibility to engage expertise in position papers) might help to have a broader analysis of topics. Furthermore, timing has to be improved engaging the EESC at an earlier stage in the legislation process. According to interview partners, the EESC also should allocate resources in a more targeted way and focus on a limited number of topics, reducing the number of opinions (for example by asking the European Commission to give the EESC some guidance on prioritized topics). To produce more political opinions modernising the training programme making members more "fluent" in policy issues could contribute to a better functioning of the study groups and an increase of the capacity to influence public decision makers. Also, from the point of view of interview partners, output might benefit from more flexible working structures breaking down silos as cross-sectional issues do not fit into specialist groups and ad hoc working groups often are not flexible enough. To some interview partners, the structure in three groups is not appropriate anymore as it does not mirror the composition the civil society.

3.3 Strengths and successful initiatives

Some aspects such as consensus, the erosion of social partnership and the relation to and acceptance by EU institutions have been seen as negative by some interview partners but identified as strengths by others. In contrast to other interview partners' opinion presented in chapter 3.2., some found that consensus may be an advantage as the EESC may confront different social positions within the organisation itself. While it is true that it is difficult to express stronger positions if a compromise must be found, it is the process how they get there that is relevant to and interesting for the European Commission. The ability to find a compromise and common understanding allowing for controversial debates which could be channelled to one political voice was named as a strength by 21% (11 out of 53) of respondents leading to stability and social consensus. According to some interview partners the erosion of the social partnership could also strengthen the Committee as they may offer solutions beyond the employer-trade union dimension. For example, it was able to address the minimum wage issue in an exploratory position that included certain principles even before the European Commission.

Despite a negative attitude of the institutions towards the EESC identified by some interview partners, others highlighted that the Committee has a very good link to the European Commission and is further improving the relations with the European Commission with the new administrative agreement. Interview partners referred to the example of the EESC, for the first time this year, organising the EU organic awards together with the European Commission, the CoR, COPA-COGECA and IFOAM Organics Europe. Interview partners also stated that many Commissioners have attended debates in EESC plenary sessions in the last couple of years. In the study groups there are always representatives of the European Commission attending debates and sessions because this is valuable to identify potential problems of an initiative. Interview partners also stated that Commissioners had benefitted from these insights and considered them in drafting of initiatives. With the European Parliament, interview partners stated, there is a good relationship with some members. Others highlighted that the

EESC also has very good contacts with national economic and social councils or gave the example that some sections with experts are in exchange with the Council working group about food safety.

Also, in contrast to the challenges described above, according to interview partners and survey respondents, there are several activities and initiatives that have proved to be successful and could serve as good practices.

Several interview partners and survey respondents mentioned the Circular Economy Platform³, a joint project with the European Commission proposed by the EESC, as a success for being proactive and innovative. Interview partners considered that it helps to position the topic in the political work and ensures many contacts with stakeholders and has also generated interest outside Europe. Other interview partners also mentioned the sustainable development observatory and the rural observatory to be a success.

Interview partners highlighted that the CCMI is an underestimated asset of the EESC. The more precise positions are the more impact they have. As the CCMI is dealing with very precise sectoral topics and is often providing insights on topics that have not yet been tackled on EU level, it has an important impact. Interview partners also stated that the EESC has been successful to promote its opinion on social economy (for example, after the 2008 financial and economic crisis bringing social aspects into the foreground mitigating the effects of the austerity policy) also since this topic is not directly an issue treated by social partners. For the same reason, others estimated the section for “External relations” (REX) to play an important role as it does not overlap with social dialogue regarding labour market questions as the social and economic sections do.

Most recently, the EESC’s participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is considered a success by interview partners as they managed to be fully included and made their voice heard. It was possible to get into cooperation and exchange with individual citizens and institutional stakeholders. In addition, the working groups succeeded in working out and prioritizing the main requirements and establishing a regular exchange with other stakeholders.

Regarding the mission of acting as an institutional forum of civil society, survey respondents referred to Civil Society Days, the liaison group and the EESC Civil Society Prize. Good practice examples in the promotion of participatory democracy mentioned are “Going local”, Your Europe Your Say Days, European Citizens' Initiative Day (ECI Days) and the analysis the role of organised civil society in the new EU-Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific agreement. Furthermore, own-initiative opinions are seen as a very important tool by interview partners to identify gaps in legislation really connecting to civil society at the grassroots. For example, in 2016, an own-initiative opinion on a European control mechanism on the rule of law and fundamental rights from the civil society point of view was adopted. As a follow-up, in 2018, the ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL), a horizontal body within the EESC tasked to provide a forum for European civil society organisations to meet and share their assessment on the state of fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law in the Member States, was approved. Since then, fact finding missions in the Member

³ <https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/>

States have been developed to check the state of play with the input of grassroots organisations, using their knowledge.

In addition, survey respondents mentioned opinions on climate change, social and societal challenges, the small business act, internal market, trade, competition, industrial policy, work life balance, implementation of human rights, a clear own position as regards the Services Directive (e.g., the country of origin principle), promoting the concept of the 'Financial Transaction Tax' and on platform work as good practice examples in the field of the advisory function in EU decision making. Also, launching EESC matters through special formats towards EU policy makers the involvement in establishing the Platform of the European Coal Mining Regions in Transition, and the ex-post evaluation of the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) were named by interview partners in this context.

In summary, interview partners, workshop participants and survey respondents accorded high relevance to the EESC, its objectives and missions, most of them seeing the advisory role in EU policy and legislation as the core function. Promotion of participatory democracy and of the values of the European integration is considered to be more important than ever. However, despite some successful adaptation of the EESC to new topics and broader tasks, it is often seen as relatively static organisation.

The attitude and ability of EU institutions to take into consideration the EESC's opinions is judged an important factor affecting impact of the EESC. Stakeholders suggested to improve its influence through enhanced communication, information, and interaction with EU institutions. Also, composition, representativeness and the link to the national level are seen in need for improvement, for example by establishing a standard member nomination process and a feedback mechanism from the national organisations. Enhanced communication is believed to play an important role in overcoming a lack visibility of and trust in the EESC. While opinions generally are perceived to be of added value, potential for improvement is identified by stakeholders participating in interviews and survey regarding a shorter, sharper and more concrete presentation involving the EESC at an earlier stage.

In contrast to the challenges mentioned, several strengths and successful initiatives have been highlighted in interviews and survey including the ability to find a compromise and common understanding allowing for controversial debates which could be channelled to one political voice. Also, while room for improvement was seen, cooperation with EU institutions has been successful in many cases. Furthermore, they mentioned several activities and initiatives that have proved to be successful and could serve as good practices, namely the Circular Economy Platform, the CCMI, the EESC's participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) as well as several initiatives and events as a forum of civil society and promoting participatory democracy and (own-initiative) opinions on certain topics.

In addition to these points of view regarding relevance, challenges including suggestions on how to overcome them and strengths of the EESC, further suggestions for the further development of the EESC Workers' Group as well as the EESC have been gathered in stakeholder interviews, online survey and a workshop held with members of the workers' group and are presented in the following chapter 4.

4. Into the future: What stakeholders suggest

During interviews, via the survey and at the Group II workshop, stakeholders suggested possible developments and factors influencing the future of the Workers' Group (see chapter 4.1.) as well as the EESC (see chapter 4.2).

4.1 The EESC Workers' Group from the point of view of stakeholders

Interview partners and survey respondents saw a need to sharpen the profile and to strengthen the impact and visibility of the Workers' Group. Regarding its profile, they highlighted that in the EESC, there is strong position of trade union interests (much more than in any other EU institutions). Promoting social issues, social values and justice, democracy, freedom, equality, antiracism, antifascism are important factors identified by interview partners. In their opinion, the Workers' Group should maintain a good level of representation of workers' rights and defend the social dimension. Furthermore, understanding the change in the world of work is of utmost importance to them. Survey respondents stated that the Workers' Group is highly important in bringing the perspective of trade unions into EU policy making and found that cross-national organisation is crucial in exerting pressure on EU level and making voices heard.

From the point of view of interview partners and survey respondents, important tasks of the Workers' Group will be to

- ensure workers hegemony in opinion making within the EESC via strong and intelligent alliance building
- act as a platform for (European) Works Councils, contact to national trade unions to promote European consciousness
- put forward an ambitious proposal with practical solutions for the transition
- consider the whole scale of workers, not only traditional workers
- create spaces of honest and open exchange not only involving trade unionist but also either union friendly people who do not know the Workers' Group or people with whom the members usually clash
- engage more in political campaigns - take more initiatives beyond opinions - look for partnerships out of the box of the usual "suspects"
- apply trade union criteria in political evaluation

To further strengthen the impact and visibility of the Workers' Group interview partners and survey respondents highlighted the need to strengthen the link with the national level of trade unionism.

They identified a general need for a stronger link and better coordination between the EU and national level of trade unionism in order to create synergies. While an articulation of the Workers' Group with the national level of trade unionism already exists, they considered that it may be reinforced. From their point of view, forces should be better joined creating a structured interactive ongoing relationship. Survey respondents also put forward that national trade unions should pay more attention to European decision-making by better integrating European issues in their structures. They suggested that articulation should also be strengthened with local and company level trade unionism reaching out to more people on the ground and considered that if the EESC was to take over organisation of social dialogue, the link with national unions should become stronger.

In general, most survey respondents do not see a need to redefine or rethink the collaboration of the Workers' Group with other EU institutions, the four EU agencies as well as the ETUC and European Trade Union Federations. However, interview partners considered that while there is a lot of symbolic cooperation, there is hardly any joint work, people talk but do not listen, and no joint positions are developed.

For them, especially a more coordinated approach with the ETUC is necessary. Interview partners stated that the Workers' Group could be more visible next to the ETUC. It should not be seen as competition but as a reinforcement of the ETUC. In this context, survey respondents highlighted that stronger networking with ETUC (continue and formalise inclusion of EESC members in EU working structures) could be implemented. While interview partners felt that the EESC could become a better mouthpiece for the European industry associations due its expertise and ability to gather and perceive the reality at national level, some survey respondents found that the Workers' Group should dare more independence from the unions in order to not only repeat their opinions and becoming more innovative.

Regarding membership and composition, interview partners and survey respondents estimated that Group II has a good link to the ground as their members' appointment happens bottom-up. In this context, interview partners highlighted that it is important that the group is homogenous and closed. However, others also saw diversification tendencies in the trade unions. Interview partners suggested, to improve outputs and activities, trade unions must send active members and not see nomination as an "end of career price". Some interview partners saw the problem that the working members are always the same which is a common problem in all the groups and suggested that more active membership is needed. In addition, survey respondents highlighted that representatives must be able to work in one of the key languages of the Union and that they should have a background in European Affairs a global European point of view and an international knowledge in the professional sector.

According to interview partners, working processes in Group II already have improved, they have become more horizontal (information is shared, decisions are not only taken in presidency). They saw a very high level of internal democracy and discipline as well as activity strengthening their role in the EESC. Still, interview partners, workshop participants and survey respondents suggested some improvements:

- using different methods for internal collaboration and more creative, open and interactive methods so everyone can contribute
- exchanging best practices within the Workers' Group
- developing group guidelines, a mixture of political and administrative direction to improve internal communication (by the Workers' Group Secretariat)
- creation of thematic responsibilities of the vice president
- enhancing the link with the sections
- enhancing cooperation with the CoR, Commission and Parliament
- improving transparency, for example on how members are chosen for tasks and how decisions are taken, communications and networking
- recording the debates or certain interventions and posting them on social media

4.2 A basis for scenarios: how interview partners and survey respondents see the EESC in 2040

The interview partners and survey respondents put forward that the future of the EESC is closely linked to the future of the EU. From their point of view, the EESC is a litmus test for the health of the EU and closely related the development of the European social project. Interview partners as well as survey and workshop participants highlighted weakening factors and described possible starting points and role models that could help the EESC to stay relevant and legitimate (for more detailed information on statements of interview partners and survey respondents see Annex II).

Interview partners and survey respondents identified several weakening factors that could cause an erosion of the EESC including the weakening of the European social project and democracy, Treaty changes, a decreasing importance of civil society, a lack of proper recognition by other institutions, the failure to create and demonstrate added value, budget restraints and a general lack of reform and forward-looking policy. Main aspects highlighted by stakeholders in this context build the basis for Scenario 1 (see chapter 5.2) considering an erosion of the EESC until 2040.

Thinking of possible futures in 2040, in addition to a potential erosion of the EESC, three different possible “role models” of an EESC being very relevant within the EU institutional context either focusing on impact assessment and foresight or representing civil society and citizen participation or economic and social aspects have been gathered by the authors of this study analysing answers given by interview partners, workshop participants and survey respondents. From their point of view, it is crucial to act now to avoid erosion.

As reflected in Scenario 2 (see chapter 5.3), interview partners considered that, in the future, policy evaluation could play an important role for the EESC. The EESC could establish a foresight mechanism and an early warning system and become a platform for looking at alternative futures. Proactively adopting topics of common interest and identifying gaps in legislation, the EESC could become an innovative agenda setter and develop proposals for alternative action plans. Interview partners and survey respondents suggested that exploratory and own-initiative opinions should be widely used. Interview partners also highlighted that, for the EESC to have an added value and voice and an important analytical role in strategic foresight, silos must be broken up and a joint communication and interaction between sections must be established. When it comes to resources, to strengthen the advisory role and to become a “chamber of the future” either human and financial resources need to be increased or priorities to be changed.

Several interview partners considered that representing civil society is the most important mission today that should be further developed. From their point of view, it could become a house of exchange and debate and home of a broad range of experts in a wide range of different fields. Related suggestions have been taken up in Scenario 3 (see chapter 5.4). Interview partners suggested that the EESC could take up a broader discourse, organise the evaluation of legislation considering positions from civil society in all Member States, and become a platform for exchange. The EESC could be a place where citizen panels can work with civil society organisations also channelling and enforcing citizen opinions. Communication with civil society should be improved. The EESC should bring the debates and their outcomes to the level of civil society in the Member States. In this context, interview partners highlighted that consensus can be seen as merit over individual lobbyists with individual positions. Still, in some cases where consensus is not possible this has to be communicated. The EESC

positions can serve as a measure of what is possible in civil society. Interview partners suggested that the EESC could become less a consultative assembly but more a forum to discuss with flexible structures and "à la carte" composition, supplemented by experts and citizens.

As a third possibility to avoid erosion building the basis for Scenario 4 (see chapter 5.5), interview partners suggested that the EESC could limit its profile to the one originally envisaged by the Architects of Europe: crafting consensus between different sides of industry. Statements should focus on narrowly defined economic and social issues. The EESC could be a place where unions and employers (and maybe governments) meet mirroring Social Dialogue and developing independent EESC proposals where social partners do not agree. The EESC would concentrate on the advisory function and do far less but far better. Interview partners put forward that less effort should be given to agreeing on opinions, more in bringing together divergent social partners from all over Europe and enhancing public visibility of positions of social partners, organising even more conferences, workshops etc., shining light on social issues. Controversial discussion might be reflected in opinions. Resources should be used to increase support to administrative staff and the performance to political work.

Based on these four pathways for the future as considered by interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants, four scenarios for the EESC in the year 2040 as presented in the following chapter have been developed as a basis for further discussion.

5. The EESC in the year 2040 – Four Scenarios

5.1 Introduction

As presented in the previous chapters, there are multiple challenges ahead for the EESC. In a larger perspective more and more areas of life are significantly shaped by EU legislation while at the same time citizens have become more distanced and sceptical towards the EU institutions. Furthermore, the EU has become (not only through the enlargements) much more heterogeneous leading to diverging challenges and interests instead of convergence.

The questions of representation and legitimacy as well as of impact and added value of the EESC must be contextualized in the framework of an uncertain future where it is not known whether the future relevance of the EU will be increasing or declining or if trends of re-nationalisation and conflict, the deepening of the integration process or further enlargement rounds will happen.

Uncharted waters also lie ahead in terms of socioeconomic transformation processes and social coherence within and between the societies of the Member States. Ecological pressures are increasing and require new lifestyles and forms of production. Geopolitical tensions and resource conflicts are gaining in intensity. (Fragile) global supply chains are under scrutiny; terms of trade are changing and trade relations are being recalibrated. Technological change is rapidly transforming entire industries and business models. Profound changes need to be shaped and it is foreseeable that economic development will be accompanied by a series of (intertwined) crises. Certainly, the two decades ahead will be a bumpy ride.

In terms of the future of the European integration process, resilience, orientation and new directions are needed, with trust and participation among the key currencies of success. And there are various possible concepts of participation, of core functions and working structures of the EESC that might – one way or another – contribute to the future path of “Project Europe”.

Here it should also be noted that civil society in the EU is itself in a state of flux. E.g., in many Member States the impact of conventional employment and labour relations has declined in recent decades. At the same time, new issues, initiatives and organisations emerged that changed the topography of civil society in the EU Member States. Additionally, the number and influence of civil society organisations and alliances at the EU level has also increased. The EESC finds itself confronted here with the need to change and several possible pathways to do so.

Structuring the future space of the EESC into four basic scenarios

Two fundamental uncertainties or variables for the development of the EESC over the next two decades are used to structure the future space and arrive at clearly distinguishable scenarios:

1. "Who will be involved / represented?"

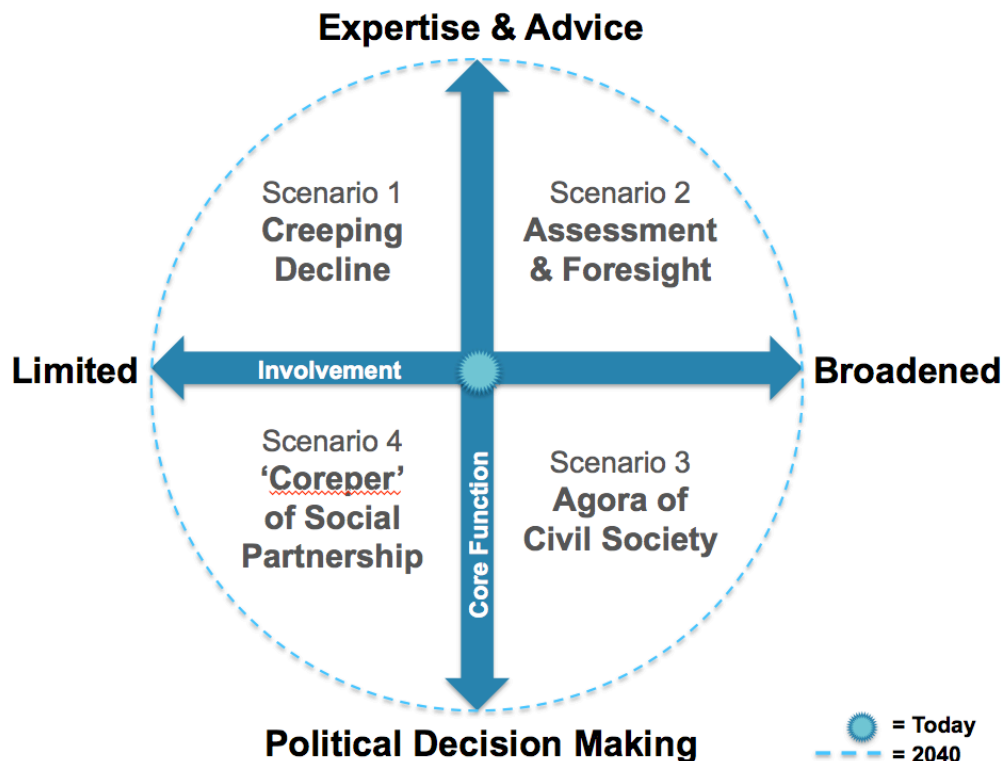
What concept of civil society underlies the EESC's work and which organisations and initiatives will be involved and how? Is it a focussed concept of involvement and topics or will there be a broader range of actors and issues, which will be addressed by the EESC? This question is essential for the future input legitimacy of the EESC.

2. "What will be the EESC's core tasks, what is its specific added value?"

Which function of the EESC will be dominant in the future, advice and expertise or political influence on the legislation and policies of the European Union? This question will be essential for the future output legitimacy of the EESC.

These two questions were addressed in multiple variations in the online survey, in the interviews, in the Workers' Group/Group II workshop and in the review of the research literature. Obviously, they are at the heart of the recent pondering about the future of the EESC. Of course, many other variables and development possibilities are also relevant and thus included in the elaboration of the scenarios.

Figure 2: Four possible scenarios / future role models of the EESC



Source: Own illustration

For further information on how to work with the scenarios please see chapter 5.6.

5.2 Scenario 1: Creeping Decline

While the EESC remains an advisory body, this role and legitimacy is eroding. In practice, there is little relevance, resonance and involvement due to a too narrow (out-dated) concept of civil society. The “routine of compromise” leads all too often to lowest common denominator opinions with little profile and innovative impulses. Despite ambitious initiatives of engaged members the EESC is not succeeding to overcome the lack of proper recognition by other institutions, the failure to create and demonstrate added value, the decreasing acknowledgement of civil society organisations in most Member States, budget restraints and a general lack of reform. In the year 2040, the EESC does not exist anymore – its heritage is taken over by a small advisory group under the roof of the European Parliament and different consultation and participatory formats managed by the European Commission.

Context

The European project is more and more challenged through crises in all forms (economic crises, trade disputes, ecological pressure, pandemics, geo-political and resource conflicts, military clashes, ...). A state of emergency thinking dominates. Confidence in politics is often higher at the national level than in European solutions and solidarity. (National) economic interests take centre stage while social issues move to the background. A strengthening of authoritarian structures and a further rise of populist parties with no direct link to civil society and increased nationalism weaken Social Dialogue as well as the EESC and its legitimacy. The EU as a whole is losing trust and relevance, and budgets leading to a stronger competition for decreasing financial and political resources between the various EU institutions. Another weakening factor is the declining influence of trade unions as well as of employer organisations in the Member States – due to a shrinking membership base and the overall zeitgeist of authoritative crisis management by the national governments.

Function and tasks

A weakening of the European social project and democracy, a lack of proper recognition by other institutions, the failure to create and demonstrate added value, a decreasing importance of civil society, budget restraints and a general lack of reform cause an erosion of the EESC’s legitimacy and relevance. The EESC is often only consulted pro forma muddling through with a bunch of lowest common denominator opinions, which no one really reads. Ignoring of its opinion by the EU institutions weakens the EESC. The EESC becomes a “Paper Tiger” and mere “Translation bureau for simple language”. Its function as communicator into the civil societies of the Member States is limited to be the “Herald of EU policies”.

The cost-cutting imperative and shrinking budgets lead to pooling with other institutions. At first, this only happens on administrative but not strategic aspects. But competition with other participatory formats like online consultations of the Commission as well as with more powerful lobby organisations and growing influence of various EU agencies, Think tanks, own expertise and advisory bodies of the European Commission and the European Parliament increasingly put the EESC on the side lines. A change of the Treaties diminishes the EESC’s role even further. Due to its shrinking influence and low remuneration, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract committed and qualified members. This, in turn, is causing interest in the EESC's contributions to decline.

In addition, a lack of proper coordination and "division of labour" between the European Parliament, the EESC and the CoR, some members of the European Parliament wanting to abolish the EESC as they see themselves as the "real" representatives as well as scandals involving member or staff misconduct play into the hands of those, who do not see a value in EESC's work and existence. Critical voices are increasingly gaining resonance. Central arguments are that EESC opinions are costly, rarely timely and with their consensus methodology have not much to add. Another criticism is that the EESC's composition has long since ceased to truly reflect today's civil society, and furthermore that a large part of its members would not actively participate anyway.

In the year 2040, the EESC does not exist anymore. Its heritage is taken over by a small advisory group under the roof of the European Parliament and different consultation formats of the European Commission.

5.3 Scenario 2: Assessment and Foresight

The EESC is substantially developing its profile towards an advisory body focusing on comprehensive impact assessments of EU legislation and policies as well as an acknowledged European centre of excellence for participatory foresight and go-to resource for developing robust solutions to long-term challenges and opportunities. Essential for this is a broader concept of civil society, which addresses and includes many more stakeholder groups. Another ingredient for success is the overcoming of silo structures and thinking to tackle the interconnected challenges in turbulent times. The establishment of long-term perspectives as well as horizontal networking and mutual learning processes between civil society organisations in Europe (and beyond) complement the "brand core" of the EESC.

Context

Searching for resilience and strategic autonomy in challenging transformation processes and profound societal changes, and – at the same time – in a context of a growing gap and dissatisfaction with existing EU legislation among those affected by it, the EESC is developed further as a multi-perspective policy impact assessment body. The European Commission, the European Parliament and also the Council of Ministers value the EESC as a "network of networks" and count on its broad representation to inform themselves about emerging needs and possible desirable and undesirable impacts of (planned) EU legislation at an early stage. Conversely, influential civil society actors recognise that the EESC can be an important instrument for making their concerns and expertise heard by the EU institutions.

Function and tasks

The EESC serves as an early warning system closely connected with the daily realities in the different Member States detecting new social issues and challenges as a centre of excellence for participatory foresight and reflexive innovation, which approaches challenges in longer term views by bringing together all perspectives of the European Civil Society. The EESC could thus play an important role as horizon scanner and sense maker in the uncharted waters and rapids of the various transformation processes of our time. Its profile focuses more on expertise in political, economical, social and environmental impact evaluations, before, during and after the implementation of EU legislation and policies. It is thus becoming a more valued source of expertise for the work of the EU institutions.

More and more, the advisory function is enhanced with the dimension of the long-term future (the impact of measures and legislation on the next generation(s); the far-reaching implications of the various transformations of the economy; road mapping for a resilient social-ecological circular economy). The impact assessment and corresponding advice functions become a core source of legitimacy. The EESC is widely valued and respected, because it delivers much more than just lobbying for any particular interests. It is more about substantive competence than about finding political compromises based on the lowest common denominator. Recommendations of the EESC give robust orientation points for future regulation away from the daily political foreshortenings, and they are not “just a point of view” but put into consideration the social diversity of needs and perspectives. Among EU policymakers, the saying emerges, “If you want to get a holistic and viable picture, listen to the explorations of the EESC and its networks.”

As a further central function, the role as European centre of excellence in participatory foresight is established. Proactively identifying topics of common interest and gaps in legislation and impulses for further integration, the EESC becomes an innovative agenda setter and develops proposals for comprehensive action plans. As a participative and multidisciplinary network with significant expertise, an engaged and forward-looking EESC develops new initiatives that address forward-looking issues, explore new policy areas and tackle issues even before the European Commission or the European Parliament ask them to do so (e.g. in the areas of health, strategic autonomy, changing working relations, ecological transformation, strengthening civil society in the EU and other countries).

The EESC is no longer primarily the arena for advocating particular interests and bargaining for compromise, but has become a house of exchange and common exploration, home of a broad range of well-connected experts with very different fields of expertise. Trade unions and employer organisations are still very important but integral players in an enlarged concept of civil society. Especially employee representatives can make use of their large membership base and strong ties with daily challenges in the world of work. But also other formations are gaining influence and the EESC is successful in addressing and “incorporating” a broader range of stakeholder groups in the Member States as well as of the growing arena of European level CSOs. The more perspectives are included, the more comprehensive and in demand the expertise of the EESC becomes.

A third basic function of the EESC is to engage in horizontal transfer of good practices and innovative solutions between CSOs in the Member States. Therefore, new tools and activities are established (e.g. tandem partnerships, adaptable toolkit boxes and transformation roadmaps for various challenges or better implementation of EU funding programmes through CSOs).

Composition and structure

Participatory foresight capabilities are established and the EESC becomes an inclusive platform for looking at the future, which involves a broad range of perspective and stakeholder groups. The EESC is closely linked with the expert groups of the EU Commission, the EU agencies and strongly involved with other EU institutions through networking and cooperation. The EESC establishes a network of foresight and monitoring experts – on EU level and in the Member States and a net of partnerships with think tanks (connecting research with political initiatives/advice and dialogue), strengthening its ties to Member State level (e.g. governments, national Economic and Social Councils, new movements, media) and improving cooperation with the CoR on a regular basis.

Composed by representatives of CSOs with many members and important societal spheres, it is an important sparring partner and feedback mechanism for planned EU legislation and policies. Criteria for choosing members are foremost expertise, systemic thinking, and their networks in different parts of the civil society in their countries (experienced members with relevant knowledge independent from their political weight are needed to provide expertise in the foresight process). Research is reorganised and a stronger research arm is developed to do more own research as well as of the development of an own analytical capacity (studies, surveys). More meetings of study groups (facilitated by hybrid meetings or alternating online/presence) take place. Former silos (groups, sections) are broken up for more cross-cutting systemic approaches – a balance is found for creating a soft and adaptable structure with only those internal bodies with a real added value remaining. The sections are abandoned, the three-group-structure is maintained, but in practice the cross-group cooperation is significantly intensified. Flexible, interdisciplinary study groups are the backbone for producing results (so they get more time and resources; rapporteurs are the “ambassadors of ideas”).

Working methods and activities

Exploratory and own-initiative dossiers are widely used to diagnose long-term challenges appropriately. For the assessment of legislation and its impact on life of those concerned the EESC is involved earlier in the legislation process (often even before any process is envisaged by the EU Commission as an idea provider), with more possibilities for feedback and exchange during the process. More frequent and new formats of hearings with outside organisations are established. Furthermore, much energy is spent on the broader impact (efficacy as well as unintended side effects) of EU legislation and policies in the longer run. Therefore, tight feedback into the different realms of civil society in the Member States is essential. Thus, the EESC is often referred to as an important “sensor” and “mood parameter” for the impact/weaknesses of EU policies. Meetings are held very flexible – often in Brussels, but also online or hosted by civil society actors in the Member States. The composition of the participants depends on the concrete issue (intensive work of study groups on a certain dossier, group meetings, plenary sessions, workshops and conferences with external experts and stakeholders). The EESC is also closely networked beyond the borders of the EU with research institutions, civil society organisations and international organisations.

Resources

To strengthen the advisory role human and financial resources need to be increased. The budget becomes more flexible. Investments in communication are enhanced (also to inform and engage a larger public in the EU’s future dialogues). An effective output ensures legitimacy and support by the EU institutions also regarding an adequate budget. EESC members are appropriately compensated for their activities (e.g., conducting research, preparing reports and studies, communicating with stakeholders and experts). And they can also access appropriately resourced organisational resources of the EESC. In 2040, the EESC is named “the smartest think tank of the year” by a renowned science magazine. Although the EESC does not have the financial and human resources of the major European research institutes and networks, its expertise is particularly valuable thanks to its participatory approach, the many contacts with and contributions from civil society players of all kinds.

5.4 Scenario 3: Agora of Civil Society

The EESC focuses on political participation and influence on EU legislation and policies through a broad involvement of the organised civil society as well as ad hoc initiatives and new movements and emerging issues. Many – existing and new – instruments and approaches for a lively and participatory participation culture are bundled under the umbrella of the EESC, which helps to reduce the gap that many EU citizens have so far felt between the EU as a political arena and their daily lives. In the year 2040, the EESC serves primarily as a facilitator to make civil society initiatives and concerns heard and to strengthen their influence on EU policies and legislation. The EESC's members, activities and contact points in the Member States have become civil society's "slip road to EU policy making". One effect of this development is that the range of topics dealt with is now much broader and more diverse.

Context

More and more areas of life are directly or indirectly shaped by decisions taken at EU level. This trend of the past decades will continue in the future. So far, the EESC is the “House of the *organised* civil society”. But civil society is dynamic and changing – so to preserve legitimacy, the composition, functions, relationships with other actors also must change. Therefore, a broader concept of Civil Society (definition/recognition and approach) is needed. In addition to the voices and positions of the organised civil society, also the unorganised and ad hoc initiatives in the Member States and on the European level must get support and access. The EESC is seen as an important instrument for reducing the EU's democratic deficit, to bridge the distance and promoting a political European identity among its citizens.

Function and tasks

The EESC understands itself to be the House of Participatory Democracy, representing the organised as well as the unorganised civil society and being a platform for broader participation of civil society as well as the motor of giving civil society a place in the EU. As a “Lighthouse” it helps impulses of the civil society to find their way into the EU’s decision-making processes. Hence, its core function is to promote, organise and channel participatory democracy towards the EU institutions. The EESC plays a larger role as a facilitator or coordinator bringing together umbrella organisations but also initiatives that are not represented in the Committee due to limited influence (without own organisational structure, with small number of members, from the small Member States, relatively new “on the stage”, etc.). For this to happen, the EESC needs to open further to social developments not (yet) represented and move the discussion away from the social partners to a broader agenda (e.g., social inequities, commons and infrastructure, regenerating the environment). Also, international issues and relations are playing a greater role.

Thus, the EESC becomes step by step an agora for civic engagement and participation, bridging organised and not (yet) organised civil society and empower them with means of making a difference. The range of topics is broadening in this process, treating everything people are interested in and which are related to the needs of daily life (e.g., housing, public services, culture, sports, media, ...). In this respect the EESC functions as an educator, enabler, incubator for civic participatory democracy in the EU and as a link and honest broker between EU institutions and EU citizens (in this role it has also to act as translator of “EU-Talk”).

Experience and knowledge of the EESC on already existing documents and laws is useful for citizen participation as many people do not know how the EU works, what its scope of action is, and what regulations already exist. The EESC helps to structure debates, informs what has already been done respectively which regulations are already in force, and pose the right questions to be asked. Citizens involved put forward topics like better income, better quality of life, housing, education, etc. that are all legitimate, but there is a need for conceptualizing where to address the issue in the complex European multilevel governance system, how to get to it through and how to afford it. That is where the EESC can contribute and elaborate new concepts in a participatory way. Empowering the organised as well as the unorganised civil society and facilitating their impact in the EU arena ensures the legitimacy of the EESC and the support by the EU institutions.

Composition and structure

To safeguard the role of the EESC members as promoters and facilitators of participatory democracy in the EU, they have to be chosen with care. Being a representative of an influential CSO in the respective Member State is not the benchmark. Expertise, longstanding experience and foremost the abilities to moderate public discourses leading to a more structured and effective engagement of society in policy making are the basic currencies. The composition is balanced, overcoming the lack of age and gender balance and should also reflect the fact that the EU is a region of temporary and permanent immigration of third-country nationals. A number of members have already retired but continue to contribute with a high level of commitment, much experience and their respective networks.

The dynamic evolution of Civil Society in the EU makes a reconfiguration of the group structure necessary – after intensive debate the Three-Group structure is abolished. The role of the sections is declining due to more and more cross-/trans-sectorial topics. Open and ad hoc structures to assess specific topics without sections and with a lighter management structure are created. The EESC becomes less a consultative assembly but more an agora to discuss with flexible structures and “à la carte” composition, supplemented by experts and citizens. EESC members serve as “Sherpas” and catalyst for the emergence of a European civil society and identity.

Working methods and activities

The EESC's rules of procedure are amended to place a requirement on all members/national delegations to establish and maintain an on-going interactive reporting relationship with their nominating principals in domestic organised civil society, their national governments and their MEP's. The EESC modernises its tools to go more directly to the ground. EESC members are encouraged and supported to organise local events in the Member States (“Going local”) to stimulate debate and participation regarding the European integration process, and to give engaged initiatives guidance to make their voice heard on the EU level. Action by EESC members in their home countries to disseminate the work of the Committee and bring in as diverse a range of views as possible are ramped up increasing the number of EESC events outside of Brussels (involving more citizens in elaboration of opinions, organising citizens petitions on relevant European subjects and organising public hearings and better quality and more thematic or sectorial events at European and at national levels). There is more engagement in communicating and connecting – to bring the debates and their outcomes to the level of civil society in the Member States and vice versa local/national initiatives and debates to the EU level, to establish a closer connection with national ESCs and corresponding bodies; here the EU supports creating national hubs where no national ESCs exist.

Under the roof of the EESC different approaches and instruments for participation are pooled (the EU Citizen's initiative, the Structured Dialogues with youth and other specific stakeholder groups, various formats of online-consultations, surveys like Eurobarometer, organising EU wide regional or branch related competitions, "City-Olympiads" and awards for sustainable change; later even hosting (pre-) conventions for amending the EU Treaties, etc.). Collaboration with the media is improved; information campaigns should involve national and local civil society. There are also manifold activities to adapt to new information pathways and new communication channels, not only social media, and also to be able to improve decisions/outcomes with key points communicating in time and in easy language to reach and involve civil society.

Resources

A precondition for all this to happen is that the EESC becomes more open, flexible, agile and better equipped with resources – otherwise, the EESC would have been bypassed by direct intervention of citizens, interest groups and/or the activities of other EU actors. There is a consensus among the Member States and the EU Institutions that the resources needed to broaden and strengthening participatory democracy in the EU in this way are less than the costs of selective or half-hearted involving civil society. The members / facilitators of the EESC are now not only paid for attending meetings but also for the comprehensive tasks and activities "at home" in their Member States, as well as to prepare and support political initiatives for the EU agora in Brussels.

In 2040, only the older generation still uses sometimes the name European Economic and Social Committee, as the EESC was – already with the last Treaty amendment in the early 2030s – renamed EACSI - the "European Agora of Civil Society Initiatives".

5.5 Scenario 4: 'Coreper' of Social Partnership

The political impact of the EESC as a core arena to bargain for compromise between important stakeholders to manage the economic crises and transitions is strengthened. This is crucial because in the future more and more issues concerning the shaping of the world of work and social cohesion (which are today still in the domain of the Member States) will be negotiated and regulated within the framework of EU policies. Involvement of the EESC is focussed on important business/employer organisations and trade unions, supplemented by other influential sustainability and "just transition" organisations. Thus, the EESC is further developed as a solid base and organisational structure for a coherent and impactful Social Partnership on EU level. Furthermore, it also serves as a catalyst for a Europeanisation of national unions and employer organisations.

Context

The 2020s and 2030s are shaped by profound economic and other crises and transformations. Shared responsibility will become more important in the EU as transformation makes it necessary to be dealt with in a more collaborative and effective way. The EU becomes a key arena for reforms of the working relations and labour standards. Thus, many social and labour market policy decisions are initiated at EU level (including guidelines for minimum wages, labour standards, reforms of national social security systems, accompanying measures for qualification and the transition to climate-neutral

and environmentally resilient production methods). In the year 2040, the social-ecological transformation of the European economies has made good progress and the EU has also set many accents for the further development of multilateral rules and regulations. The EESC has contributed to this with many initiatives and agreements of the social partners.

Function and tasks

As the “Coreper“ of social and stakeholder dialogue the EESC is the permanent body and supporting platform for the most relevant socioeconomic CSOs (foremost the trade unions and other worker representatives and their counterparts on the employer side). Besides the cross-sectoral and sectoral European social partners, also influential sustainability organisations – as a third player, sometimes disturbing, sometimes as a reconciling force – are involved to tackle also ecological issues, non-conventional business and forms of employment, informal work and public goods and services. This mirrors the development in many Member States towards a “Social Dialogue+” or a “Social Trialogue” (e.g. through involvement of environmental and local community CSOs in the boards/decisions of corporations, or in general the increasing accountability of corporations to different stakeholders). The overarching aspiration is to shape a just transition – and thus to pave the way for sustainable business models and jobs with good working conditions.

Initially, many feared that these developments could form a coalition of capital and environmental concerns against the interests of employees. But it turned out that the EESC positioned itself as a “guardian of the social pillar” – in close cooperation with and, where necessary, also as a corrective to the EU Commission, enforcing the implementation of the pillar of social rights and monitoring in the context of the internal market. The EESC prepares and organises social dialogue (incl. third parties) as a compromise-making apparatus and develop independent EESC proposals where Social Partners fight each other. The strong role of employer organisations and employee representatives in the EESC architecture continue and social dialogue is less overlapping with “Civil Dialogue” (which is managed mainly by the consultation processes of the EU Commission as well as the formal and informal ties of the MEPs to their constituencies). The EESC supports the work and shape more what the social partners are doing and could also invest in capacity building of actors. A new role of the EESC in national action plans is to strengthen collective bargaining in countries / sector where coverage is low.

The EESC’s activities centre on economic and social issues, e.g. external relations will – with some exceptions – no longer dealt with. A basic function is to inform effective EU decision-making, thus helping to ensure that European policies and legislation are more in tune with economic and social circumstances “on the ground”. The EESC is an important arena for reconciliation of interests and compromise between capital and labour.

Composition and structure

To enhance the political influence of the EESC, members who are highly ranked in the hierarchy of their national organisation are chosen. Like the permanent representatives of the Member States in Coreper, the members of the EESC also have a weight and political standing that should not be underestimated. Agreements that are reached are usually robust. It hence is composed of high-level representatives, especially from business organisations and unions. Diplomatic skills a crucial to become and succeed as an EESC member. The composition of Group 3 is reconfigured – with a clear focus on CSOs, which are relevant for the economic change/development, especially from economic sectors and activities that are not sufficiently covered by trade unions and employers' associations; also

Group 1 and 2 are becoming internally more heterogeneous (better representing the socioeconomic reality in the Member States). The sections are reformed to better fit the scope of the EESC. The study groups are changed into working groups, engaged with concrete political decisions, which are on the EU economic agenda. After a Treaty change the members of the EESC will be elected by national elections (with a certain percentage of members nominated by EU level organisations such as BusinessEurope and ETUC).

Working methods and activities

The EESC gains more political impact, i.e. it is not only to be formally consulted, but also to have the opportunity to initiate action. In certain areas that fall within the sphere of the social partners, they can reach agreements that are then translated into EU regulations or standards. Thus, the principle of horizontal subsidiarity is more frequently put into practice and there is a greater incentive to find compromises between employer and employee side. There is more direct work of the EESC with social partners in Member States, where the EESC is more present and visible than previously. Political decisions by the EU Social Dialogue are prepared in the EESC.

It focuses on fewer, socioeconomic topics. The number of opinions is reduced – but often more comprehensive and in-depth. Less effort is given to agreeing on opinions, more in bringing together divergent social partners from all over Europe and enhancing public visibility of positions of social partners, organising even more conferences, workshops etc., shining light on social issues.

The EESC is speeding up its internal procedures and decision-making and improves content presentation and timing of opinions. Majority decisions contribute to its relevance. Nevertheless, a culture of consensus is still vivid in the EESC. But where consensus is not possible this is also accepted and has to be communicated. The EESC positions serve as a measure of what is possible in/with civil society; different views are formally communicated; opinions are structured in such a way allowing different points of view. It is regularly communicated how or why not a compromise was achieved informing about pitfalls, problems and open questions. The EESC becomes more political and present less technical opinions. To enhance impact, the EESC proposes concrete legislative changes and recommendations through amendment in every opinion. Every rapporteur has the obligation to follow-up, present and engage in discussions about opinions of the EESC.

The EESC has successfully enhanced its relations with the EU Commission and the EU Parliament, for example with common activities like the organisation of flagship events (“Week of Social Dialogue”; political conferences and stakeholder dialogues on various transformation challenges like circular economy; climate neutral production and hydrogen strategy; human rights at work; trade, competition and industrial policies...), ensuring a fluid relationship with the key institutions. The president of the EESC is regularly exchanging with the president of the Commission and of the EP to formally discuss a common agenda, every vice president of the EESC has a formal point of contact of the same category in the EP and in the Commission.

Resources

Increasing resources will be primarily used to increase support to administrative staff and the performance of political work. The members of the EESC are basically compensated by their posting organisations. The EESC budget approval has been handed over to the European Court of Auditors.

5.6 Some remarks on using the scenarios

„Scenarios are stories about the future,
but their purpose is to make better decisions in the present.“

Ged Davis

The scenarios outlined above do, of course, not predict what *will* happen. However, they can help us to cope better with the uncertainties and possibilities of an open future. We can get a better idea of how the decisions we make today will affect work and life tomorrow. One central aim of scenarios is to encourage different stakeholders to join in an exchange about what might and should happen in the future, the implications of the way things may come to be, and strategies for today to contribute to positive developments.

Each of the four scenarios has its – albeit not evenly distributed – bright and dark sides, its specific challenges and opportunities. And surely everyone who considers these scenarios will have an opinion as to which of them they perceive desirable and which would be better avoided.

The scenarios in this study are thus to be understood as an invitation to dialogue; to reach an understanding with others about what will be of decisive importance for the future of EESC – about what kind of futures we would like to have for this institution created more than 60 years ago; and what we have to do today to make it happen. A time horizon of some two decades can help to think and exchange about what we want to achieve in the longer run. And how action and decisions we take today might fit in a broader picture. In this sense, scenario building is a tool for orientation, for consideration, for exchange with others – and for action.

The more different stakeholders – with their different perspectives, aims and possibilities to act – are involved in such a dialogue, the better.

Lead-in questions to work with the scenarios

For each scenario:

- How would you / your organisation / the ability of the EESC to move things / the quality of EU legislation and policies / civil society ... be affected, when this scenario would happen?
- What are the risks, what are the opportunities?
- What might be the driving forces pushing/pulling us into this scenario? What are the preconditions that this might happen (and will be sustained)?
- Do we already see first signs today that point in this direction?
- How would our current policies and actions play out in this scenario? Would they work?
- What would be an appropriate role to act in this described context?

In the synopsis of the scenarios:

- Which one of the described scenarios would you prefer? Which ones should be avoided?
- What are possible means, which might be suitable allies to make the preferred scenario more probable to happen?
- Are our current strategies and actions are in line with the preferred scenario?
- Which alternative options to act are available? Which resources are necessary?

Scenarios can (and should) be further thought out and through in terms of concrete issues. For example, it would be possible to explore in greater depth which working methods would be most effective in the respective framework conditions, and how each scenario would affect the future appointment/composition of members, the scope of issues dealt with, or the EESC's international activities.

Some organisational aspects

There are many different formats of dialogue and exchange that have proven themselves. One can organise a short session of two (not less!) hours, or a one- or two- day seminar / conference. You can exchange views with a handful of people, or in a larger circle. In the familiar circle, or across the usual group boundaries.

As a rule, the dialogue about scenarios should take place in a trust- and respectful atmosphere. Even if there are diverging views and interests in the room, it's not about to defending positions. It's an open exploration of possible developments and everyone involved has the possibility to bring in his concerns. Building a strategy and standing up for your own legitimate interests comes afterwards.

6. Conclusions

The future of the EESC will certainly be influenced by how the European multi-level governance system as a whole will continue to develop. How diverse the EU will be, what competencies it will have and how effectively it will be able to fulfil them, in short, what role the EU will play in the lives of its citizens in the future. However, it is not only a question of what course the European integration process will take in general, but also of the EESC's identity in the future distribution of roles among the EU's architecture. It is about its core functions, its specific purpose and interplay with the different EU institutions, its modes of action and means. Many actors and driving forces will - in one way or another - influence what is to come.

Generally, most stakeholders accord a high relevance to the EESC's objectives and missions also considering its opinions to be of added value, however, this study also identified recurring concerns about its representativeness and visibility as well as the willingness and ability of EU institutions to take into consideration the EESC's opinions. While there is consensus for example regarding the need to further develop the EESC's communication and cooperation with the EU institutions, EU social partners and other stakeholders, there are diverging possibilities for the future of the EESC that need to be discussed in order to agree on the direction that the EESC wants to take.

Clearly, not changing anything and continuing business as usual is not an option to enhance legitimacy and relevance of the EESC and might even lead to their rapid erosion. It is time to act now and essential not to lose time. Against this, the present study suggests four scenarios for the EESC in 2040, the one of "Creeping Decline" surely not wanted by most stakeholders. Nevertheless, it should be discussed to acknowledge various dangers ahead and, where necessary, prevent them.

The remaining three "role models" outlined in the scenarios "Assessment & Foresight", "Agora of Civil society" and "Coreper of Social Partnership" provide a good basis for dialogue on the longer-term development of the EESC. Each scenario has its specific preconditions, opportunities, challenges and risks. And surely everyone who considers these scenarios will have an opinion as to which of them they perceive desirable, and which would be better avoided.

But the riskiest course would probably be to sidestep the question of the EESC's future profile or trying to please everyone with an "all-in-one-solution" – about what should be the primary functions and sources of its *raison d'être*. In the coming years, the EESC – and many other stakeholders – must set the course so that it can continue to be a relevant building block of the European house in 2040.

The authors see five areas of major critical decisions to be taken to shape the future of the EESC:

1. **Involvement:** Who will be represented by the EESC and how can participation be designed?
2. **Scope:** What topics will the EESC address and focus on?
3. **Identity and aspirations:** Does the EESC want to be a stronger political body, or does it prefer to be an advisory body providing expertise?
4. **Structure and working formats:** Will the EESC's work be focused on Brussels, or will it engage more in a network within Member States "going local"? And how can desk work, moderation, communication, and networking activities be strengthened and, where necessary, appropriately remunerated?

5. **Equipment and use of resources:** Where should the resources (people, time and finances) be used sensibly to reach a stable resource situation guaranteeing good effectiveness?

When it comes to involvement, the definition of the underlying concept of civil society (e.g., organised or unorganised) as well as the question of how to involve new social movements will be of major importance. In case of a broader involvement, enhanced approaches and instruments for participation must be found. To ensure a high level of competencies, experience and representativeness of the EESC's members, appointment processes could be changed considering democratic legitimacy of the mandates, the possibility to include a certain number of the members representing European level civil society organisations or a rotation system or variable composition of the EESC according to topics treated.

The EESC either could become a stronger political body or focus on its advisory providing expertise. The scope or range of topics treated is closely related to the question of who will be involved and represented. A more focussed concept of involvement most likely will lead to a more restricted number of topics treated. A broader range of actors involved also may broaden issues addressed by the EESC. Also, the way topics are chosen may differ. In a setting where the EESC wants to adopt a role in 'Assessment and Foresight', it will have to proactively identify topics of common interest, gaps in legislation and give impulses for further integration. It would deal with future-oriented topics, explore new policy areas and tackle topics even before the European Commission or the European Parliament asks. Becoming an 'Agora of Civil Society' a broader range of topics will be put forward by citizens and bundled and promoted by the EESC. In case the EESC is acting as the 'Coreper' of social partnership socioeconomic topics will prevail. Beyond these considerations specific to the different scenarios, a general more focused selection of topics will positively influence the effectiveness of resource use.

The EESC will have to define its core tasks in order to prove its added value. In the future either the function of giving advice and providing expertise or the political influence on the legislation and policies of the European Union will prevail. Also, depending on the identity choice, the EESC may seek a political legitimization requiring hard opinions where the often-discussed consensus-principle will not be beneficial or decide to focus on expertise and advice where the big picture and reaching common ground could help to find a robust approach. The scope of topics and actors involved will depend on the EESC's design claim. Its core functions will decide on the resources needed and where they will be invested.

And wherever the journey leads, the Workers' Group – along with others – will have played an important role in preparing the future.

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Annex I: List of interview partners and survey respondents by function

	Interview partners	Survey respondents
Members of the EESC Group I:	3	10
Members of the EESC Group II:	4	20
Members of the EESC Group III:	1	20
EESC administration and shared services:	5	1
Former EESC members:	1	1
Commissioners/members of their cabinets and Directorate-General	6	-
Members of the European Parliament:	-	4
Members of the CoR:	1	1
Representatives of European employer organisations:	-	2
Representatives of European trade union organisations:	4	2
Others (e.g., researchers)	-	3
Total	25	64

Annex II: Statements of interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants regarding the EESC's future

Annex II gives an overview of answers given by interview partners and survey respondents regarding the future of the EESC in 2040 as summarised in chapter 4.2 building a basis for the scenarios in chapter 5 considering weakening factors leading to an erosion of legitimacy and resources as well as factors estimated by interview partners to be leading to a relevant and legitimate EESC. While the authors have grouped and clustered statements made by interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants, no own recommendations are made here by the authors of this study.

Weakening factors leading to an erosion of legitimacy and resources

Regarding weakening of the European (social) project and democracy interview partners stated that the European project is more and more challenged. Confidence in politics is much higher at the local and regional level than at the national and European level. With more scepticism arising, the advisory bodies may be the first to be forgotten. Dismantling of democratic and strengthening of authoritarian structures or even regimes would weaken social dialogue as well as the EESC and its legitimacy. A further rise of populist parties with no direct link with civil society and increased nationalism would have the same effect. Crises in all forms (pandemic, war, economic crises) can be reason for exceptions to dismantle democratic structures which leads to an erosion of the legitimacy of the EESC. Its relevance also would decline if economic interests were to take centre stage again because of the pandemic, rather than social aspects. If, as a result of wars, the state of emergency dominates the way of thinking and if this is reflected in legislation in such a way that social issues remain in the background, the EESC would only be consulted pro forma. In general, a change of the Treaties could limit the EESC's role.

Interview partners also highlighted that a decreasing importance of organised civil society would have a weakening effect on the EESC. In this context they put forward that more citizens' involvement and the tendency to move away from representative/organised civil society to individuals might threaten the existence of the EESC. Citizen assemblies could create an imbalance as opinions of organisations representing millions of people have the same impact as the opinion of individual citizens. There is a risk that the collective expertise within EESC in opposition to a collection of individuals in expert groups will not be recognised. Further decreasing membership in organisations and hence participation in organised civil society would have a negative impact on the EESC. A withdrawal of trade unions to the national level since they consider the EU level to be not important due to a lack of negotiations, would harm the EESC's role. Ongoing marginalisation of civil society in Member States and the opinion of individual and randomly chosen citizens becoming more important would make it easier for politicians to ignore their opinion.

When it comes to a lack of proper recognition by other institutions interview partners thought that a change of the Treaties may become more likely if those members of the European Parliament who would like to abolish the EESC as they see themselves as the "real" representatives were able to enforce their opinion. A battle of power with other EU institutions will question and weaken the EESC. But also without a Treaty change, the ignoring of its opinion would weaken the EESC. While a formal legitimacy would persist, a real and practical relevance would not exist. Furthermore, the EESC's relevance would also erode if the European Commission was organising its own advisory

bodies and the EESC was invited as mere observer. The EESC could be replaced by internal units also at the European Parliament. If direct ways of (online) consultation were to be further developed and used, this competition to the EESC might lead to its erosion. This also would be the case if the number and influence of lobby organisations were to further increase. In addition, a lack of proper coordination and "division of labour" between the EP, the EESC and the CoR could have the same effect. A major scandal involving member or secretariat misconduct would play into the hands of those, who do not see a value in EESC's work (or in the EESC's existence).

Survey respondents also highlighted that if the EES fails to demonstrate added value and/or is not successful in communicating it, it will lose legitimacy and credibility. If the EESC focuses too much on its internal affairs not enhancing its visibility and quality of activities and outputs, this will contribute to the development. The added value of the EESC will be limited if

- its 'usefulness' to organised civil society across the Member States becomes too remote and obscure
- members are disconnected from the lives of ordinary citizens (e.g., in case of older, retired members)
- members become less active (e.g., due to workload in their job at home)
- online participation remains the main model of members participating as quality of opinions will further deteriorate
- the EESC cannot achieve consensus but also if it is too consensual without debate
- the EESC is not political enough and does not emancipate itself from social partners

Finally, funds and budget play an important role from the interview partners' point of view. They highlighted that a constraint that all institutions are facing are limited human and financial resources. If Member States try to reduce the budget, and at the same time more issues are coming up to be treated, there are more tensions. Even if there are great ideas, it is not always possible to put them forward because resources are already stretched. Also, a budget reduction is a concrete risk. Distribution of European funds will play a role." Survey respondents also mentioned that as consequence of a broad discussion to reduce so called EU's bureaucratic cost and within the scope of a change the EU Treaties the advisory committees may be eliminated (a smaller and cheaper advisory group under control of the EP with at least 30-50 members nominated by European civil society organisations could then play a marginalized role to represent civil society voice). Or, under the excuse of better managing European financial sources the CoR, as a key European political institution could persuade the European Parliament (EP) to cancel / withdraw the mandate and annual budget provided for the EESC. Expertise might also be provided by other institutions, universities or consultants on an ad hoc basis.

Towards a relevant and legitimate EESC

Thinking of possible futures in 2040, in addition to a potential erosion of the EESC, different possible "role models" of an EESC being very relevant within the EU institutional context either focusing on political impact assessment and foresight or representing civil society and citizen participation or economic and social aspects have been put forward by interview partners, workshop participants and survey respondents. From their point of view, it is crucial to act now to avoid erosion.

Political impact assessment and foresight

Regarding profile, tasks and topics, interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants stated that policy evaluation could play an important role given the dissatisfaction with existing EU legislation of those affected by it. In this context, the EESC could become a political impact assessment body with an important political role. Engaging organisations with an important number of members, evaluation of European policies can have a real added value. The EESC already has access to the expertise to play a role in political, social and environmental impact evaluation, before, during and after the implementation of the legislation. It should have a stronger position and ensured role in the European decision-making process regarding social, environmental and economic impact assessment. Considering national specifics in legislation also will be important. The recommendation of EESC should become the base of future regulation not just a point of view to help politics and bureaucrats.

In addition, they highlighted that the advisory function should be enhanced with the dimension of the future. The impact of legislation for the next generation should be integrated in to the EESC's advice as it will become more important for the EESC to detect as early as possible the social issues that rise in the contemporary world. The EESC could establish a foresight mechanism and an early warning system and become a platform of looking at the future. Proactively adopting topics of common interest and identifying gaps in legislation, the EESC could become an innovative agenda setter and develop proposals for alternative action plans. As a chamber of the future and Think Tank with important expertise, a more engaged and anticipatory EESC could develop new initiatives that are not in the Treaties, dealing with future-oriented topics and exploring new policy areas (e.g., health, strategic autonomy) and tackling topics even before the European Commission or European Parliament ask them to. It would be good for the EESC to have a little more power, i.e., not only to be formally consulted, but also to have the opportunity to initiate something. The EESC should be equipped with the (quasi-)legislative initiative.

Regarding working methods and activities, according to interview partners and survey respondents, exploratory and own-initiative opinions should be widely used. Greater use of information and evaluation reports would also be valuable in diagnosing problems appropriately.

For the assessment of legislation and its impact on life of those concerned the EESC should be involved earlier in the legislation process, focus on 3-4 topics (e.g., circular economy, reconversion of industries, energy, integration of migrants, skills) and assess the impact afterwards. A prolonged time of involvement in the legislation process could lead to more discussion and feedback and more time for political discussion. The EESC will have to become more political and present less technical opinions.

Shared responsibility will become more important in the EU as topics as climate change have to be dealt with in a more collaborative and effective way. Involvement of the EESC in policy making network, established cooperation and connection with other EU institutions is becoming increasingly important, as is strengthening the EESC at member state level, better cooperation between CoR and the EESC on a regular basis and creating a better link with national Economic and Social Councils. The members must seek more contact with other institutions and develop more forms of hearings with outside organisations. Every rapporteur should have the obligation to follow-up, present and engage in discussions. To become a proactive and ambitious, innovative and creative body, the EESC will have to speed up internal procedures and decision making, improve content presentation and timing of opinions. Majority decisions may contribute to its relevance. To be more productive and enhance impact, the EESC should propose concrete legislative changes and recommendations through

amendment. A reorganisation of research and more meetings for example for the study groups (e.g., facilitated by hybrid meetings or alternating online/presence) should be considered.

Against this, they stated that also structures should be adapted. The EESC might profit from a stronger research arm to do more its own research as well as of the development of an own analytical capacity (studies, surveys) as a base for positions. For the EESC to have an added value and voice and an important analytical role in strategic foresight, silos must be broken up and a joint communication and interaction between sections must be established. While to enhance the political influence of the EESC, members should be highly ranked in the hierarchy of their national organisation, experienced members with relevant knowledge independent from their political weight are needed provide expertise in the foresight process. A balance must be found creating a soft and adaptable structure with only those internal bodies with a real added value remaining.

When it comes to resources, interview partners and survey respondents suggested to strengthen the advisory role and to become a “chamber of the future” either human and financial resources need to be increased or priorities to be set. Allocation of human resources has to be more efficient and investments in communication have to be enhanced. Pooling with other institutions to free resources (only on administrative not strategic aspects) could give the EESC the opportunity to use resources for innovative tasks. A partnership with Think Tanks might be interesting as they look for partners to test their ideas, while the EESC is missing analytical skills. To establish the EESC itself as an academic Think Tank would need an important increase of resources. As study groups are very important, they should be given more time and resources.

Representing civil society and citizen participation

Considering profile, tasks and topics, interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants that “civil society is an important mission today that should be further developed. The EESC can be the “House of Organised Civil Society”. It could become a "lighthouse" - a genuine home for organised civil society with a unique position, not as a lobby group but as a house of exchange and debate and home of a broad range of experts in a wide range of different fields. In order to promote participatory democracy, the EESC has to continue to represent the voice of EU citizens towards the EU institutions, national institutions and other stakeholders.

In addition to enhancing this function, the EESC should have a say on policy and giving a political position from the organised civil society point of view. It could give an input to the European Commission and the Council that will work more closely with the EESC as it needs to hear more directly the points of view of civil society. The EESC could organise a broader participation of civil society. The EESC could become a real voice of civil society and a motor of giving civil society a place. The EESC could take up a broader discourse, organise the evaluation of legislation considering positions from civil society in all Member States, and become a platform for exchange. The EESC would act as the official assembly of civil society, organise events to discuss specific topics on a yearly basis. For this to happen, the EESC needs to open further to social developments not (yet) represented and move the discussion away from the social partners to issues such as the environment and digitization. The EESC could play a larger role as a facilitator or coordinator bringing together umbrella organisations but also from Member States that are not necessarily represented in the Committee due to limited number of members per small countries. It could also help members to organise events such as going local.

As mentioned in the CoFoE, there is a gap between organised civil society and individual citizens that the EESC could bridge becoming a forum or arena for citizen participation. Experience and knowledge of the EESC on already existing documents and laws would be useful for citizen participation as people do not necessarily know how the EU works. They need to be accompanied and educated in the work giving them some knowledge about the different points to deepen their involvement. The EESC could be a place where citizen panels can work with civil society organisations also channelling and enforcing citizen opinions.

In parallel to citizens, involvement of organised civil society is needed. Citizens involved put forward topics like better income, better quality of life, housing, education, etc. that are all legitimate, but there is a need for an addition how to get to it and how to afford it. That is where the EESC could contribute and elaborate on how to have a stronger economy. The EESC could take the lead in (permanent) citizens' consultation mechanisms to promote participatory democracy, host and supervise citizen panels embedded in expertise and collective interest, try to promote citizen initiatives, and organise them. Also, participation of individual citizens has to be organised, people are needed who hold the debate together, tell the participants what has already been done as they may not know what is already worked on at the European level and think about questions to be asked. This could be done by the EESC. The EESC could also think about how to increase participation in elections at local, national and European level providing an alternative narrative and bringing the EU closer to the citizens. The EESC could be the frame, the one who goes out and tries to get citizens thinking. A broader range of topics could be tackled by the EESC treating everything that people are interested in further developing fields such as culture, sports, recreation important for citizens.

About working methods and activities, interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants estimated that communication with civil society should be improved. The EESC should bring the debates and their outcomes to the level of civil society in the Member States. The EESC should establish a closer connection with national ESCs and corresponding bodies. The EU should support creating national hubs where no national ESCs exist. Action by EESC members in their home countries to publicize the work of the Committee and bring in as diverse a range of views as possible need to be ramped up. The connection to those represented and access of organisations to their representatives must be established and improved. The role of the members of the EESC is important also inside their Member States because they can use a huge amount of information for their organisations, also to give training on what happens in Europe. The Rules of Procedure should be amended to place a requirement on all members/national delegations to establish and maintain an ongoing interactive reporting relationship with their nominating principals in domestic organised civil society, their national governments and their MEP's. Trying to ensure the voice of those at the grassroot level as much contact with local communities as possible is needed. More publicity and communication campaigns should involve civil society. The collaboration with the media should be improved. There should a stronger role for National Civil Society Organisations to deliver input to and to act as a multiplier for the EESC opinions. There is also a need to adapt to new information pathways, not only social media but also to be able to improve opinions with key points communicating in time and in easy language to get to civil society. New media give a perfect possibility to better organise discussion and deliberation. The EESC could become a "relais" to the citizens. To get more input directly from citizens would be interesting. The EESC needs to modernize its tools to go more directly to the ground. They should make the most of online consultation as well

as listening to the voices of members. Technology will develop to get connected more easily and promote exchanges.

To strengthen the role of the EESC in promoting participatory democracy in Europe, survey respondents highlighted several factors closely related to involvement of citizens and engagement with civil society such as significantly increasing the number of EESC events outside of Brussels, in the Member States, involving more citizens in elaboration of opinions, organising citizens petitions on relevant European subjects and organising public hearings and better quality and more thematic or sectoral events at European and at national levels.

Consensus can be seen as merit over individual lobbyists with individual positions. Where consensus is not possible this has to be communicated. The EESC positions can serve as a measure of what is possible in civil society. Different views should be formally communicated, opinions should be structured in such a way allowing different points of view, in case of fundamental differences. Governance has to be more flexible and agile, acting and reacting more quickly. Otherwise, the EESC will be bypassed by direct intervention of citizens. If the EESC had a link to the expert groups of the European Commission, this would be a powerful network for EU policy making. If the EESC was networking with the expert groups, national Member States would send more qualified members amplifying the expertise leading to a more structured engagement of society in policy making.”

When it comes to the structure, interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants highlighted that in the real world, organised civil society has acquired more importance, so that the weight of the groups should be re-evaluated and the internal set-up in three groups be reconsidered. Especially those who do not feel seen in the normal policy process and new social movements must feel represented in the EESC. Open and ad hoc structures to assess specific topics without sections and with a lighter management structure should be created. The EESC could become less a consultative assembly but more a forum to discuss with flexible structures and “à la carte” composition, supplemented by experts and citizens. Binding rules for representativeness of members should be established setting minimum standards to minimize the political influence of governments guaranteeing that all the members are nominated by active organisations in the Member States and making sure diverse representation of civil society including representation by vulnerable groups.”

Regarding resources, they mentioned that while the EESC creates cost, also not involving civil society has important costs. Applying a ‘bookkeeper’ point of view means missing out on many of the strengths and overall importance of the EESC. If the EESC was more networked into policy making, this could avoid moving towards focus group policy making. If topics are not prioritized, resources are not directed to where they have an influence. If the Committee were to be the coordinator of broader events bringing together umbrella organisations of civil society, this would require additional resources. Against the background of limited resources the EESC should try to focus on certain topics for working with citizen panels as well as to narrow the scope and to invest in further fields (culture/sport).”

Back to the core: an economic and social body

Regarding profile, tasks and topics, interview partners, survey respondents and workshop participants suggested that the EESC could limit its profile to the one originally envisaged by the Architects of Europe: crafting consensus between different sides of industry. Statements should focus on narrowly defined economic and social issues. External relations will no longer be dealt with. The EESC could

be a place where unions and employers (and maybe governments) meet. The basic function and added value of helping to ensure that European policies and legislation are more in tune with economic, social and civic circumstances on the ground will be important. The EESC's role in the future could be to contribute to strengthening of the social partnership profile and a reconciliation of interests between companies and employees this and to be a common voice. The advisory function should be the main EESC tasks. The EESC could become the 'keeper of the social pillar' enforcing the implementation of the pillar of social rights and monitoring in the context of the internal market.

It will mirror Social Dialogue and develop independent EESC proposals where social partners fight each other, as for example in the case of the minimum wage. The strong role of social partners in the EESC architecture will continue and Social Dialogue should never be overlapped by civil dialogue

As the European Commission does not want to play the administrative role in Sectoral Social Dialogue anymore, social partners could either take over themselves or outsource the organisation to the EESC. Promoting and organising Social Dialogue could play an important role in the future of the EESC. The EESC could lead the work and shape more what the social partners are doing and could probably also invest in capacity building of actors. A new role of the EESC in national action plans could be to strengthen collective bargaining in countries where coverage is below 80%.

Interview partners suggested that working methods and activities should allow for different, sometimes critical voices and focus on legislative amendments and strong coordination for the organisation of social dialogue. The EESC should not provide opinions on every possible topic. It would concentrate on the advisory function and do far less but far better. Less effort should be given to agreeing on opinions, more in bringing together divergent social partners from all over Europe and enhancing public visibility of positions of social partners, organising even more conferences, workshops etc., shining light on social issues. Controversial discussion should be reflected in opinions. More direct work with social partners in Member States could be promoted, the EESC being present and visible. It should be communicated how or why not a compromise was achieved informing about pitfalls, problems and open questions. The number of opinions and meetings, and when it comes to the structure the number of members and working groups should be reduced. The sections should be revamped at least every five years. Cross-cutting activities should be the norm, silos should be broken down. Members should still be active and influential in society with a focus on employers' and workers' group. Its composition is balanced overcoming the lack of age and gender balance. Members and staff are highly skilled. Members could be elected (a Treaty change would be needed). Resources should be used to increase support to administrative staff and the performance to political work.



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