



Report

CONNECTING EU SEMINAR 2022

Geopolitical turmoil at Europe's door: **the perspective of civil society**

24-25/11/2022

Zagreb, Croatia - Hotel Dubrovnik

The EESC "Connecting EU" seminar is an event mainly directed to communication professionals working for civil society organisations representing employers, workers and other social, occupational, economic and cultural organisations across Europe.

Every year, the "Connecting EU" seminar focuses on a topic that has captured the attention of media in Europe in the run-up to the seminar and engages journalists, academic, experts and civil society in debate.

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Foreword

Dear readers,

This brochure brings you the highlights of the EESC's Connecting EU 2022 seminar, held in Zagreb in November 2022 under the title *Geopolitical turmoil at Europe's door: the perspective of civil society*.

Like every year, Connecting EU, one of the EESC's main communication events, brought together communicators – communication and press officers from civil society organisations represented in or linked with the EESC, journalists, policy-makers and researchers – to discuss a topic that is very much at the centre of current political and media debates.

In the year that brought war back to Europe's doorstep after a very long time, unleashing tragic, dramatic and history-changing events, it was only logical that our seminar would discuss the war and its impact on the EU. It was also appropriate to hold the seminar in Zagreb, the capital of the EU Member State that 30 years ago itself went through the horrors of war.

Although Russia's brutal aggression on Ukraine is taking by far the highest toll on the Ukrainian civilian population, causing its unimaginable suffering and subjecting it to incomprehensible cruelty on a daily basis, the war's destructive tentacles have crept into all corners of Europe.

Energy prices are rising, inflation is high, populism is rampant. Truths are being turned upside down, and conspiracy theories getting wilder and wilder, making people less empathetic to human suffering, making them shrug their shoulders or even come up with excuses for something as horrifying as kamikaze drones dropping bombs on Kyiv.

The EU has lent support to and pledged solidarity with the Ukrainian people and its civil society from the first day of the war. We let them know we are standing by them and will not give up on them. We are very well aware that this support comes with a cost. But it is a cost we have to pay, not only out of solidarity but because it is a matter of human decency not to look the other way. Otherwise, we stand to lose so much, if not all.

The idea of the seminar was to show how crucial it is for our organisations, and for us as their communicators, to be aware of and to understand the stakes of the geopolitical turmoil we are going through.



We chose three topics we thought were not only closely connected with the EESC's work, but were also of immense relevance for the EU: enlargement, communication in times of crisis, and energy and its rising costs.

We talked about how the drums of war had returned enlargement to the EU agenda in a big way after a decade-long impasse in the Western Balkans that ensued after our host, Croatia, joined the Union in 2013. Has the EU finally realised it has a strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in its immediate neighbourhood?

Another topic was how the war in Ukraine was changing political communication and stretching the frontiers of cyber warfare. We talked about disinformation being one of the greatest threats to our democracies and a source of dangerous polarisation in our societies. Can Ukrainians teach us a lesson or two on how to fight disinformation effectively?

Our last debate focused on the hot potato of the moment: energy and its rising prices and the cost of moving away from fossil fuels. Is there a silver lining to the current energy crisis? Can it help us switch to renewables more quickly?

I hope our seminar has managed to answer some of the questions connected to these topics or has sparked further debates and encouraged you to find out more.

We are already looking forward to new interesting debates at our Connecting EU 2023 seminar! Hope to see you there!

Until then, wishing you interesting reading,

Cillian Lohan

EESC Vice-President for Communication



Welcome session

Chair and introduction:

- **Cillian Lohan**, EESC Vice-President for Communication

Welcome speeches:

- **Christa Schweng**, EESC President
- **Marin Piletić**, president of Economic and Social Council (GSV), Croatian Minister for Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
- **Andrea Čović Vidović**, Head of Media, European Commission Representation in Croatia
- **Violeta Simeonova Staničić**, Head of the European Parliament Office in Croatia

Keynote speech:

- **Galia Ackerman**, writer, journalist and historian, French translator of Anna Politkovskaya's work

Q & A session



ENLARGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND ENERGY: HOW TO ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE EU

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has significantly impacted Europe's society and economy and may bring about tectonic shifts in its political, economic and social landscape. The enormous challenges that Europe is facing as a result of the war in securing its energy supply, managing enlargement and handling the new forms of disinformation were the subject of the EESC's annual seminar for civil society communicators, "Connecting EU", which was this year titled "Geopolitical turmoil at Europe's door: the perspective of civil society".



Christa Schweng
EESC President

At the seminar, it was stressed that the EU should not only support Ukraine in its war effort day after day but should also think about Ukraine's long-term reconstruction and path to EU accession.

"Let's try to imagine Ukraine in a couple of years. I know it is difficult to conjure up a positive picture against the backdrop of constant news of missiles hitting Ukrainian cities every day, damage to the water network and power cuts. But I am convinced that our thinking and our work today must be guided by how we want to see the future of Ukraine."



I see Ukraine as a reconstructed, prospering country based on European values, allowing its citizens to return to decent lives in their home country



Even with a war of its making in Ukraine, the Kremlin is still targeting both the extreme right and the extreme left in the West

I see a reconstructed, prospering country based on European values, allowing its citizens to return to decent lives in their home country," said EESC President **Christa Schweng** in her opening speech in Zagreb.

How did the West get it wrong with Vladimir Putin? Writer, journalist and historian **Galia Ackerman**, who was also the French translator of Anna Politkovskaya's work, addressed this question in her keynote speech.



Galia Ackerman
French-Russian historian, author and journalist

In her opinion Putin has been pursuing a hidden agenda since the beginning of his rule in Russia. Nonetheless, some Westerners could not see through him, and some preferred not to. **"The KGB-trained Vladimir Putin has the mentality and ethics of the KGB. And I can agree that someone who is a product of the KGB could be very skilful in cheating most of the world,"** said Ms Ackerman.

Even with a war of its making in Ukraine, the Kremlin is still targeting both the extreme right and the extreme left in the West. **"To the extreme right, Putin speaks about societal values or 'healthy conservatism', which is not healthy because it is, for example, against the rights of LGBT minorities,"** explained **Ms Ackerman**. To the extreme left, on the other hand, Putin speaks the language of anti-Americanism.



Marin Piletić
Croatia's Minister for Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy

"Not so long ago, Croatia was in completely different geopolitical circumstances. We were on the other side of the EU border and had UNESCO world heritage sites like Dubrovnik under attack. At that time, the song *Stop the War in Croatia* became popular. Many still remember the lyrics 'Europe, you can stop the war,'" said **Marin Piletić**, Croatia's Minister for Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, remembering



Croatia went through a brutal war in the 1990s and was once "on the other side of the EU border". Always aspiring to become an EU member, it was the last country to enter the EU in 2013. On 1 January, Croatia became part of the Schengen area and joined the eurozone

the war in the Balkans and the hope Europe brought to them. His country, which joined the EU only in 2013, has now met the conditions for entry into the Schengen area from January 2023.

"This war is not only a war by Russia against Ukraine. It is a war on Europe's energy, economy and values. And, yes, it is a war on democracy too," said **Andrea Čović Vidović** from the European Commission Representation in Croatia. The Commission "will continue to offer political, financial and humanitarian assistance to



Andrea Čović Vidović
European Commission Representation in Croatia



The Commission will continue to offer political, financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, at the same time continuing with its efforts to reduce energy bills for EU households and businesses

Ukraine", but simultaneously it will continue its efforts to reduce energy bills for households and businesses in Europe. Our actions as individuals can supplement what the EU institutions are doing. Energy savings in our daily lives (turning the heating down, using public transport instead of cars) can not only help build a more sustainable Europe but can also help Ukraine by turning off the taps to Russia's war machine.



Violeta Simeonova Staničić, head of the European Parliament Office in Croatia, highlighted the European Parliament's "Generators for Hope" initiative launched by its President, Roberta Metsola, who was the first leader of an EU institution to visit Kyiv in wartime (in April 2022). The campaign calls on EU cities to donate power generators and transformers to help Ukrainians get through the harsh winter and at least secure the supply of electricity and running water to hospitals and other

life-saving facilities. The European Parliament awarded 2022 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to the brave people of Ukraine, represented by the president, elected leaders and civil society. The European Parliament reaffirms consistently that it will politically support Ukraine on its European path.



The European Parliament has pledged its unwavering political support for Ukraine and the country's European path. Its recent campaign "Generators for Help" is aimed at helping Ukrainians get through the harsh winter

Panel I: In the shadow of war - Europe's new geopolitical context and consequences for the future of the EU

Moderated by: **Mila Moralić**, editor and reporter at TV N1/CNN exclusive news channel affiliate

Introduction by: **Seamus Boland**, President of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

Panel:

- **Dušan Gajić**, Correspondent for RTS - Serbian public Broadcaster; founder of SEETV - South East Europe TV Exchanges; author of award-winning documentaries (*The Graduates, The Promise, The Long Road through Balkan History*)
- **Leila Bičakčić**, Director at Centre for Investigative Reporting, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Adnan Čerimagić**, Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans, European Stability Initiative
- **Marika Djolai**, Key Expert at Particip GmbH, Research and Policy at Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)
- **Augustin Palokaj**, Brussels correspondent and columnist for Croatian national daily newspaper Jutarnji list

Discussion



The panel discussion focused on the impact of Russia's actions on the Western Balkans and the lessons Ukraine can learn from the enlargement process in the Western Balkans. **Seamus Boland**, President of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group, spoke of a geopolitical rupture that exposed Europe's weaknesses. **Dušan Gajić**, Brussels correspondent for Serbian public broadcaster



RTS and founder of South East Europe TV Exchanges, explained the reasons for the pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia. **Adnan Ćerimagić**, senior analyst for the Western Balkans at the European Stability Initiative, talked about a lack of sincere EU commitment to enlargement. **Leila Bičakčić**, director at the Centre for Investigative Reporting in Sarajevo, warned against relaxing conditions for enlargement. **Marika Djolai**, key expert at Particip



Europe has suddenly discovered it is not in a good place

GmbH and a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), stressed the role of civil society. Lastly, **Augustin Palokaj**, Brussels correspondent and columnist for Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji list*, explained why the EU would not reject Ukraine's European aspirations.

Russia's war in Ukraine sealed the end of Europe's post-cold war security order. As a result, the EU is facing pressing questions regarding its geopolitical neighbourhood and the EU's own enlargement policy, which has remained deadlocked in the Western Balkans for at least a decade. **"Europe has suddenly discovered it is not in a good**

place. We cannot back away from that reality. We are vulnerable. It is about managing defence, energy, food security, the free movement of people. All these issues are suddenly on the agenda, whether we like it or not," said **Seamus Boland**. The EU continues to strive for inclusiveness and equality, but now it also wants to have the power to deal, among other things, with crimes like a war of aggression. While enlargement



has an element of competition with other international actors, the EU must hold on to precise requirements on the rule of law and social justice. Otherwise, it would risk favouring the "development of enemies from within".

Serbia remains unique in the Western Balkans in its stance towards the war in Ukraine and, despite its official status as an EU candidate country (accession negotiations opened in 2014), has yet to align its policy towards Russia with the EU's. The war has actually become an additional trigger for anti-Western sentiment and public expressions of support for Russia. This is the result of narratives portraying Europe as dishonest and hypocritical towards Serbia (narratives which have been supported by Russia) that have been spread for many



Europe's response to Serbia's European aspirations has been inadequate and short-sighted. Twenty years on the road to the EU with still no end in sight is too long for the process to be credible and to maintain public support

years by the authorities, the mass media and some significant opposition forces. Conveniently for those in power, these narratives undermine the EU's credibility as an arbiter in assessing the progress, and especially the lack of progress, of reforms in Serbia. Additionally, a form of nationalism, which was consolidated under Slobodan Milošević, feeds the tension between a European orientation and "national interests", leading to unresolvable conflicts (as in the case of Kosovo). **"Finally, you can understand Serbia's current position only by considering how inadequately and short-sightedly Europe has responded to its European aspirations. Twenty years on the road to the EU with still no end**



Adnan Ćerimagić
Senior analyst, European Stability Initiative (ESI)

in sight is too long for the process to be credible, understandable and meaningful and to maintain public support. Instead, many Serbs started to see the road to accession as a long obstacle race with no finish line in sight," said Dušan Gajić.

While Serbia needs "to reinvent its attitude towards Europe and redefine its interests, the European Union needs to put a credible offer on the table for all enlargement countries." **Adnan Ćerimagić** argued that the impasse in the Western Balkans was not essentially due to the lack of reforms in individual countries, but to the fact that the EU was not ready to let in six Western Balkan countries: this was the main cause of the "complete collapse of the enlargement process in the region over the past decade". The solution would be to give a specific date, e.g. 2027 or



The fact that the EU was not ready to let in six Western Balkan countries was the main cause of the complete collapse of the enlargement process in the region over the past decade

2030, with an unequivocal pledge from the EU that once the countries fulfil the conditions, they will enter the EU or at least the single market and enjoy the four freedoms granted by the EU Treaty.

"Ukraine has a much more realistic approach towards the EU accession process. President Zelensky said that Ukraine wants to join the EU, but it wants to become part of the EU single market and have the four freedoms even before then, while still on its path to accession. This is completely different from what you hear from some of the leaders in the Western Balkans," said **Mr Ćerimagić**. There is no reasonable alternative to EU enlargement for the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova because "there is no evidence they might prosper and catch up with Europe's core in socio-economic and political terms whilst staying outside of the EU or its single market". Recent history has shown that outside its core (EU15) and the group that joined later (the 13 countries of the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements), Europe is an area of instability, wars and



Leila Bičakčić
Director at Centre for Investigative Reporting in Sarajevo

conflicts. This area includes Ukraine, which declared its European aspirations at least as far back as 2004.

The granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022 (just a few months after Kyiv's application) was considered an expression of political solidarity for a country at war. This intensified calls for Bosnia and Herzegovina [which became an EU candidate country in December 2022] to finally be granted such status as the country was wrecked by fighting back in the 1990s.



However, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet made much significant progress in meeting the conditions for enlargement, and the reform of the judiciary, in which the international community has politically invested very heavily, basically has to start from scratch. Bosnia and Herzegovina thus illustrates the dilemma in the enlargement process between political (or even geopolitical) priorities and meeting the strict conditions for membership. **"From the diminishing number of conditions to be met, Bosnian politicians see that if they stall the process long enough, there will be no**

conditions to fulfil. So they would not only be granted EU candidate status, but expect to be full-fledged EU members because no demanding requirements will be set upon them," said Leila Bičakčić. Augustin Palokaj also pointed out Brussels' temptation to support "stabilitocracy", i.e. betting on some political leaders in enlargement countries to preserve political stability despite the vast deficiencies of their rule. Still, the granting of EU candidate status could become a political "wind pushing the EU agenda back into Bosnia and Herzegovina's mainstream politics", Ms Bičakčić hopes.



A positive Western Balkan experience is civil society's involvement in enlargement issues, such as through the Berlin process. Civil society organisations can hold international actors accountable for their enlargement commitments

"Ukraine should keep the EU from coming into a position of losing its commitment to the accession process of Ukraine and Moldova. They must not, for a moment, forget that the commitment to achieving and maintaining peace in Ukraine needs to go hand in hand with the EU accession process," said Marika Djolai. Her advice to Kyiv would be to analyse the mistakes and successes of each of the Western Balkan countries on the road to the EU and then build Ukraine's strategy based on realistic priorities. A positive Western Balkan experience, in Ms Djolai's view, is civil society's involvement in enlargement issues, which is taking place, through means such as participation in the Berlin Process, which is no longer a purely inter-governmental initiative. Civil society can engage with the international community, which has a strong hand in everything happening in enlargement countries. Moreover, civil society organisations can hold



The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates the dilemma in the enlargement process between (geo) political priorities and meeting the strict membership conditions. But EU candidate status could become a political wind pushing the EU agenda back into Bosnia's mainstream politics



international actors accountable for their enlargement commitments. And they can also facilitate relationships between governments and civil society organisations in EU countries. In the case of the Western Balkans, civil society's collaborations and engagements can improve the region's image, which, as opinion polls show, is often dire, despite recent positive developments e.g. in the Netherlands, one of the most prominent enlargement sceptics.



The later you enter the enlargement process, the longer it takes. In this sense, Ukrainians will have a tough time. But in the end, they will not face a major disappointment because the EU will not reject them

"Experience shows that the later you enter the enlargement process, the longer it takes. In this sense, Ukrainians will have a tough time. Still, in the end, they will not face a major disappointment because the EU will not reject them," said Mr Palokaj. The EU did not dare to say "no" to Kyiv's application for EU candidate status because it was a request from a country fighting for its survival. That is a different starting point from Croatia, which is now the youngest member of the European Union, having joined in 2013. Another huge difference between Ukraine and the Western Balkans is the size of its territory and population (in the case of Turkey, size was one of the largest hurdles from the very beginning). Nonetheless, the current war has brought back to the EU the recognition that enlargement is not just an economic issue, but also a peace-building project in Europe, and this should help both Ukraine and the Western Balkans.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans was at a standstill well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which radically intensified the geopolitical challenges for Europe in the Balkans and the post-Soviet eastern neighbourhood. A major reason (and according to some experts, the main reason) for this impasse in the Western Balkans was the EU's lack of a sincere commitment to further enlargement in the foreseeable future. "Enlarging enlargement" by granting EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova is an opportunity to reinvigorate the process. Acknowledgement by Western public opinion of the EU's importance not only as an economic and social project, but also as a peace project could be an important driver. For the Western Balkans and Ukraine, Moldova and, hopefully, Georgia, there is a need for a clear time frame for their path towards EU membership and the active inclusion of civil society in the enlargement process. The fundamental requirements of membership, such as the rule of law, cannot be sacrificed for the sake of (geo)political priorities.



FRIDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 2022

Day 2

Opening session

Opening session:

- **Cillian Lohan**, EESC Vice-President for Communication
- **Hrvoje Zovko**, president of the Croatian Journalists' Association





Hrvoje Zovko
president of the Croatian Journalists' Association

The second day of the "Connecting EU" seminar featured two panels, both on immensely relevant topics that have been dominating political and media debates in Europe and the world since early 2022. The morning panel dealt with communication in times of crisis, against the backdrop of the current information war between Russia on one side and Ukraine and Western countries on the other. How can the public be shielded from disinformation and blatant lies, which in some cases may lead people not only to lose their sense of what is right and what is wrong, but also to find excuses for inexcusable atrocities?

The afternoon panel broached the subject of energy and rising energy prices, and the general rise in the cost of living. Entitled "The energy revolution between the war and climate objectives", the panel brought together science communicators, energy experts, analysts and journalists who debated the new challenges Europe is facing on its path to the energy transition.

In the opening session, "Connecting EU" gave the floor to the president of the Croatian journalists' Association, **Hrvoje Zovko**. A TV reporter and documentary maker, who witnessed the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, made several documentaries on the war in Croatia and reported on the unrest in Kosovo and on the Afghanistan war, **Mr Zovko** recalled Croatia's wartime experience and stressed the need for independent journalists to scrutinise their country's authorities even during a defensive war.

When Croatia was at war, as bombs flew over the heads of journalists, and their relatives and compatriots, there were "expectations that people in the media would abdicate from journalism" and not be critical of their government's actions. There were attempts to intimidate those reporters who did not follow suggestions for a "moratorium on objective journalism".

"Journalism, even in wartime, should abide by its standards. Of course, journalists should report on attacks on their country. But they should not lie when their side or their country's authorities commit war crimes. A true journalist does not lie in anyone's interest. This rule applied during the war in Croatia. And it applies now," said Mr Zovko.

He compared Russia's propaganda lies about the causes of the war in Ukraine to Hitler's lies about invading Poland, but was highly critical of EU bans on specific Russian media organisations because "you cannot beat propaganda through censorship".



Journalists should report on attacks on their country. But they should not lie when their side or their country's authorities commit war crimes. A true journalist should not lie in anyone's interest

Panel 2: Communication in times of crisis

- **Moderated by :** **Ivana Dragičević**, editor-at-large and reporter for N1 television/ CNN exclusive news channel affiliate; Europe's Futures Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna
- **Introduction by:** **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu**, member of the EESC Employers' Group and president of the EESC Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship (SOC)

Panel:

- **Christine Dugoin-Clément**, geo-political analyst, associate researcher, "standards and risks" chair, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne
- **Régis Genté**, journalist, co-author of the book *Volodymyr Zelensky: in the mind of a hero*
- **Viktoriiia Romaniuk**, deputy editor-in chief of *StopFake.org*, deputy director of Kyiv's Mohyla School of Journalism
- **Tim Weber**, executive director and head of editorial at Edelman UK, former business and technology editor of BBC Online, expert in Russian disinformation

Discussion



The threats and opportunities of wartime communication were the topic of the panel "Communication in times of crisis". The debate focused on Russian disinformation activities and on the rise of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who thanks to his skills and modern technology has managed to stay connected with Ukrainians and appealed for help from parliaments abroad.

Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu, a member of the EESC Employers' Group and president of the EESC Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, spoke about the communication challenges for the EU institutions. **Christine Dugoin-Clément**, geopolitical analyst and associate researcher holding the "Risks" chair at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, highlighted the cyber dimension of communication attacks. **Régis Genté**, journalist and co-author of the book *Volodymyr Zelensky: in the mind of a hero*, talked about the message of the Ukrainian President. **Viktoriia Romaniuk**, deputy editor-in-chief of *StopFake.org* and deputy director of Kyiv's Mohyla School of Journalism, recounted how Ukrainians had learned to face Russia's disinformation attacks well before February 2022. Finally, **Tim Weber**, executive director and editorial head at Edelman UK, former business and technology editor of BBC Online and expert in Russian disinformation) described Moscow's disinformation strategies, which now appear more effective outside the West.



The war in Ukraine has unleashed a vast "battle of narratives" that results in communication becoming a potent weapon used by Russia against Ukraine and Europe, which Moscow is trying to dissuade from supporting Kyiv. The West has so far responded to the war

by unitedly imposing sanctions on Russia, by supplying arms to Ukraine and with substantial public support for refugee admissions. However, the European Union, as **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu** said, needs to become stronger, quicker and more flexible in countering Russian attacks in the field of communication. For example, the resilience of European societies to Russian propaganda continues to be tested by repeated attempts to sow division on the refugee issue. One response should



The European Union needs to become stronger, quicker and more flexible in countering Russian attacks in the field of communication. Unfortunately the EU is often still stuck in its processes

be a more systematic anticipation of future hostile narratives in order to pre-emptively defuse them with "pre-debunking". **"Communicating in a crisis means operating in a very unstable and fast-changing environment. We need to be flexible and move fast. But unfortunately the EU is often still stuck in its processes, so there is room for improvement,"** said Mr Plosceanu.

The ability to see the whole, multi-level nature of communication threats is another prerequisite for a smooth response. **"You need to see the full picture of the conflict to bring together all the layers of a possible coordinated attack, including cyberattacks, disinformation attacks, attacks carried out via social media,"** said **Christine Dugoin-Clément**. Even before February 2022, there had already been more and more cyber-attacks on Ukraine's banking and military systems, mainly using Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) tactics. These were accompanied by disinformation campaigns to reinforce attacks in both dimensions. There is a danger that simultaneous major cyberattacks, which can hit communication infrastructures, hinder public access to essential services and temporarily paralyse railways or seaports, might be used as a "cyber-coercion" tool against

European states to influence the state machine and to deter and prevent decision-making. Europe must learn to defend itself from such danger. Ukraine's path from 2014 to 2022 can teach Europe how to address communication challenges. After experiencing several years of war since 2014, Ukrainians have learnt, as **Ms Dugoin-Clément** stressed, to recognise the cyber dimension of events quickly. And last spring, the call for volunteers to form an "IT Army of Ukraine" to fight Russians in the cyber domain became a great display of Ukraine's creativity and flexibility.



Christine Dugoin-Clément
geopolitical analyst, associate researcher,
University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne

The "great sociological changes" in those regions of Ukraine that only a few years ago were not considered ready to firmly defend their separate identity from Russia is another aspect of the shift that took place in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, as highlighted by **Régis Genté**. President Volodymyr Zelensky, who now symbolises the struggle of Ukrainians, comes from one of these regions. Even after 2014, he built part of his acting career in Russia and only began to learn Ukrainian more diligently in preparation for the presidency. **"The hero is not Zelensky himself, but the people of Ukraine, whose struggle he incarnates. He delivers this emotional message: We are fighting for freedom, for our freedom, and the freedom of Europe"**, said Mr Genté. This message, in which Zelensky draws on his actor's experience and the support of a team



Ukraine's path from 2014 to 2022 can teach Europe how to address communication challenges in cyberspace. Last spring's call for volunteers to form an "IT Army of Ukraine" to fight Russians in the cyber domain became a great display of Ukraine's creativity and flexibility

of professional scriptwriters, can be seen as a form of tough communication defence against Russia. It is both about Ukrainians, whom Zelensky's daily videos keep connected with a shared narrative that is strengthening national unity, and about Europeans (and Americans), whose support Ukraine needs so much. Zelensky's messages to foreign parliaments are disseminated in both traditional and social media, which means that he addresses European public opinion directly, in a sense, bypassing the inter-governmental channel. On the other hand, Zelensky's communication has been unsuccessful in Latin Africa and Africa.



Régis Genté
journalist and author of a book on Volodymyr Zelensky

Viktoriia Romaniuk, referring to Ukrainian civil society's efforts in building communication resilience over the past eight years, underlined that the system of combatting disinformation must be already in place before a crisis (whatever its nature) breaks out. **"There is an absolute need for a systematic approach to disinformation."**



Zelensky delivers this emotional message: We are fighting for freedom, for our freedom, and the freedom of Europe. This message, in which he draws on his actor's experience and the support of a team of professional scriptwriters, can be seen as a tough communication defence against Russia

We need to know everything about our enemy, and we need systematic debunking to limit harmful disinformation. We also need to educate our audience about media and teach media literacy and never give up," said **Ms Romaniuk**. Additionally, we must prepare in advance communication channels for the public to use when they lose access to the internet or mobile phone networks (and e.g. hear the fake news that President Zelensky is calling for capitulation).



Viktoriia Romaniuk
deputy editor-in chief at StopFake.org, deputy
director of Kyiv's Mohyla School of Journalism

Russia's old or even 'traditional' disinformation narratives ("Ukraine is a fascist state", "Ukraine is a failed state") prepared the ground for aggression, which, as a result, was met with widespread public approval in Russia itself. Now these narratives, which the Kremlin used as a kind of pretext for war, are being supplemented by new narratives aimed at an international audience - nuclear threat, food crisis, migration. This is why education of both children and adults, focused on media literacy, remains a must in Ukraine and abroad (apart from professional verification tools and checking of sources), as **Ms Romaniuk** stressed. Her organisation has been successful in working with large social media outlets, including Facebook, which has helped to shed light on disinformation patterns in Ukraine.



There is an absolute need for a systematic approach to disinformation. We need systematic debunking to limit harmful disinformation. Education focused on media literacy remains a must everywhere

Russia's disinformation attacks have two dimensions. In addition to sowing fake information, the other aim is to undermine the credibility of any relevant information by propagating many, including contradictory, descriptions of reality. It is facilitated by today's "splintered news consumption", with no TV news programme watched by everyone, as was the case in the past. **"Russia is not trying to convince us that Putinism is a better way of ruling the world and governing society. Instead, they try to create so many fake truths, so many multitudes of realities that only doubt remains, and everything becomes questionable"**, said **Tim Weber**. In addition, Russians use "selective outrage" through "whataboutism", with questions such as: "Why are we addressing the food

problem in Ukraine and not the food crisis in Africa? Why are we dealing with Ukraine and not Tigray?" It draws on a mix of justified grievances combined with anti-Western, anti-American tropes, aiming to sway the discussion of Russia's actions. It is compounded by the fact that Western organisations monitor social media in English, German and French, but there is almost no monitoring for Asian or African languages, for example. As a result, outside the West we may be losing the information war with Russia.

According to the "Trust Barometer" developed by **Mr Weber**'s organisation, trust in governments, NGOs and the media is declining. Those that people still trust are



their peers: friends, family and people like themselves. This is a reason why Russia has franchised its propaganda operations to people who look like their target audiences. **Ms Romaniuk** stressed the need to be alert to the mobilisation of non-state influencers, including the use by Russians of networks that spread information chaos on COVID. As **Ms Dugoin-Clément** pointed out, while we have the tools to capture deep fakes, they must be improved for poor-quality or low-resolution videos. The trouble is that poor quality videos are spread by "ordinary people" participating, knowingly or not, in disinformation campaigns. This raised the issue of citizen journalism,

which is not, and is unlikely to be in the foreseeable future, regulated in democratic societies. **Ms Romaniuk** argued that citizen journalists can also be educated and trained to join the fight against disinformation.



There is no monitoring of social media in Asian or African languages by Western organisations. As a result, outside the West, we may be losing the information war with Russia

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Disinformation is a potent weapon used now by Russia. It is not only about promoting false narratives, but also about spreading numerous, often contradictory versions of fake news to deprive information of any credibility with the public. It is imperative to learn how to recognise the various layers of attacks - from those conducted via social media to cyberattacks on infrastructure. Therefore, anticipating and preparing for crises, media literacy and education are essential. The risk of Russia winning its information war outside the West needs to be addressed urgently by both Ukraine and the EU.



Panel 3: The energy revolution between the war and climate objectives, challenges to the Green Deal

- **Moderated by: Domagoj Novokmet**, journalist, senior editor and anchor at TV N1/CNN exclusive news channel affiliate
- **Introduction by: Oliver Röpke**, President of the EESC Workers' Group

Panel:

- **Igor Grozdanić**, energy expert, researcher, energy sector and strategic projects director at Croatian company Turbomehanika d.d.
- **Jarosław Pietras**, energy specialist, a Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre, former Director general in the Council of the EU
- **Zion Lights**, author and climate activist, former Extinction Rebellion spokesperson
- **Clare Taylor**, science communicator, journalist and policy analyst specialised in energy and environment

Discussion

Closing statement

- **Cillian Lohan**, EESC Vice-President for Communication



The panel debate on "The energy revolution between the war and climate objectives, challenges to the Green Deal" focused on the severe problems in the EU energy market, compounded by Russia's war against Ukraine. Achieving the EU's green goals is possible, but participants highlighted both the need for significant investment and the geopolitical and social challenges involved.



Oliver Röpke, President of the EESC Workers' Group, stressed that the European Union and dialogue between the social partners had a role to play in addressing the social and economic issues related to the energy transition and the war. **Igor Grozdanić**, a Croatian energy expert and director of strategic projects at the Croatian company Turbomehanika, warned against Europe becoming dependent on other risky suppliers. Grozdanić pointed out that the energy transition should be significantly accelerated so that renewable sources would challenge the dominance of fossil fuels. Households and entrepreneurs would then be able to produce and manage their own energy, they would know their energy bills and budgets in advance and would not be dependent on insecure fossil fuel. **Zion Lights**, science communicator, climate activist and former Extinction Rebellion spokesperson, explained why she had moved away from her opposition to nuclear energy. **Clare Taylor**, also a science communicator, journalist and policy analyst specialising in energy and the environment, opined that the energy crisis was an opportunity to redouble efforts on energy efficiency and demand side management, and that addressing energy poverty should be the first priority. Lastly, **Jarosław Pietras**, an energy specialist, Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre and former director-general at the Council of the EU, spoke about

the need to address energy poverty and respond to the signals of the energy market, rather than suppress them through government intervention.

The European Green Deal, which aims to combine a rapid energy transformation with social justice, was already posing challenges before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The war has severely exacerbated the pressure on prices in the energy market, demonstrating the cost of Europe's dependence on Russian energy and shining a harsh spotlight on the shortcomings of the EU electricity market. **"Russia's aggression against Ukraine forces us to either backtrack to coal, which still plays a significant role in the EU, or double down on renewable resources development. The war has also reminded us of the danger of relying on a very small number of suppliers. This must be borne in mind when deploying renewables and solar panels,"** said **Oliver Röpke**.



Public support for accelerating the green and social transition is dependant on appropriate response to energy poverty. If people cannot pay their bills, this will harm the Green Deal and may undermine the democratic stability of EU countries

The best solution for the European Union is to push on by accelerating the green and social transition; however, public support for this is dependent on an appropriate response to energy poverty (currently exacerbated by inflation). If people cannot pay their bills, this will harm the Green Deal and may undermine the democratic stability of EU countries. The US Inflation Reduction Act poses an additional challenge to industry, investments and jobs in the EU: this programme of generous subsidies to the US clean technologies sector is based on rules that the EU institutions believe undermine fair competition.

As **Mr Röpke** stressed, these challenges are a litmus test for the EU institutions, which must respond rapidly with a view to achieving strategic autonomy and deliver an ambitious industrial policy, massive investments and decent new jobs. This is imperative, especially in regions hard hit by the costs of the energy transition. The EU must combine its quest for affordable prices, sustainable



Clare Taylor
science communicator, journalist and policy analyst

energy and geopolitical stability (or security of supply) with efforts to preserve social and regional cohesion. This can be achieved through dialogue between the social partners, involving workers and trade unions.

However, there may be a bright side to the current increase in energy prices: yes, steps must be taken to mitigate its impact, especially on the most vulnerable, but it could also act as an incentive to green investments.



Measures such as deep renovation and efficiency investments make it possible to save up to 80% of energy consumption in buildings. But all of them come with a hefty price tag. The silver lining of the current energy crisis is the price signal on hydrocarbons

"For the last three or four decades, we have known how to build according to passive house standards that use 10% of the energy of a regular house. For existing buildings, deep renovation, combined with renewables and efficiency investments, make a 60 to 80% reduction feasible. It is not rocket science, but all of these measures come with a hefty price tag. The silver lining of this crisis is the price signal on hydrocarbons," said **Clare Taylor**. Private investors are currently ready to invest more in energy efficiency. Still, civil society and local authorities must drive this change from the bottom up. Moreover, civil society must play a critical role in ensuring that costs are distributed in a socially fair way when considering trade-offs in changes to the energy mix.

Jarosław Pietras asked a provocative question: are the current high energy prices really such a bad thing? After all, the green transformation tools in the European Union will increase the price of fossil fuels by factoring in the costs of CO2 emissions in order to support the transition to renewable energy. Therefore, the energy price crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine might be seen as accelerating the transition to renewables by sending just those price signals.



Jarosław Pietras
energy specialist, Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre

Mr Pietras was sceptical about the usefulness of price caps on fossil energy, a hotly contested topic in the European Union for several months [in December 2022, the EU Council adopted a market correction mechanism for gas]. **"I come from Poland. I was born in times when markets were ignored. It was tough for people**

to live in that situation. I do not believe that there is any real way to control markets. All you can do is prevent extreme situations and address some extreme market failures." He stressed that the primary way to reduce energy prices in the EU is to diversify the supply of energy, including renewables and nuclear, with the caveat that energy costs for fossil resources will remain high in Europe for a very long time.



The primary way to reduce energy prices in the EU is to diversify the supply of energy, including renewables and nuclear, with the caveat that energy costs for fossil resources will remain high in Europe for a very long time

One of the social problems of the green transition is the requirement to frontload expenses - for example, insulating your house is far from a cheap endeavour and it will take years to see any financial benefit.



Systemic solutions to mitigate this "rapid large expense vs very delayed benefit" effect could streamline the energy transformation, but this is a task for the Member States or the EU as a whole (provided the Member States confer such competences upon the EU). There is also a

need to split incentives for tenants and landlords to avoid the problem that to "install a solar panel on a roof, you have to own that roof".

"Cheap energy is only possible when renewables win over fossil fuels. Until then, we will be dependent on Russia or Africa, meaning on Russian uranium, Nigerian oil or Algerian natural gas," said **Igor Grozdanić**. Europe is facing a change in its economic-social paradigm because "it is not just about substituting renewables for fossil fuels, or switching from diesel-



Cheap energy is only possible when renewables win over fossil fuels. Until then we will be dependent on Russian uranium, Nigerian oil or Algerian natural gas

powered buses to electric-powered or hydrogen-powered vehicles". We are changing society and the way we think, plan and see our economy. Moreover, Europe needs to prepare for a new era, dominated by electricity due to the shift away from - though not the complete elimination of - oil and gas, e.g. in housing. **Mr Grozdanić** argued that "solarisation" (i.e. the use of solar panels) is "the most efficient and cheapest form of generating electricity, but also a source of energy for heating and cooling households and businesses". Even meeting part of the energy demand using energy that consumers/prosumers generate themselves, combined with increased energy efficiency, would be a simple way to fight energy poverty.

The discussion on nuclear energy focused on prices, the climate crisis, reducing energy consumption and dependence on imported raw materials. The matter of imported materials for renewables was also raised. **"I used to protest against nuclear energy. And I changed my mind. First of all, there is plenty of evidence around**



the world that when nuclear power is phased out, it is replaced to a great extent by fossil fuels. Most importantly, the scientific consensus is that we need nuclear energy in our energy mix if we want to decarbonise," said **Zion Lights**. In an argument with Mr Grozdanić, she stressed that the need to import certain raw materials (such as uranium for nuclear power plants) from outside the EU should not be a reason to abandon the investment. On the contrary, it should push us to look for alternative solutions. She urged against pitting different sources of clean energy against each other, and advocated for making decisions based on scientific data.

The solution to energy poverty is energy abundance (without denying the need to be energy efficient and



The scientific consensus is that we need nuclear energy in our energy mix if we want to decarbonise. The solution to energy poverty is energy abundance, without denying the need to be energy efficient.

avoid wasting energy), said **Ms Lights**. Energy is central to our way of life and well-being and that is not likely to change. The future may call for even greater energy production; the world outside the affluent West wants to catch up economically and that will be energy intensive.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The response to the energy challenges facing Europe triggered by Russia's assault on Ukraine should be to persevere with and even accelerate the green transition. Rising energy prices may provide an additional impetus to move away from fossil fuels. However, the Green Deal goals will not be achievable in a democracy (due to the need for voter support) unless they are flanked by strong measures to prevent energy poverty and preserve social (and geographical) cohesion within the EU. Dialogue with the social partners is needed to build a consensus on the energy mix and energy transformation trade-offs. Clean&low carbon energy sources, energy saving efforts and energy efficiency (especially of buildings) are paramount. Nevertheless, Europe needs to prepare for a significant increase in energy demand, especially as the Global South wants to catch up with the West.



Speaker profiles



Galia Ackerman is an essayist and historian. She has a PhD in History (Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University) and is an associate researcher at the University of Caen. She is considered to be one of the best French experts on post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine. The ideology of Putin's Russia is a key part of her research topics. Since May 2021, she has headed up a digital media organisation in French and English: Desk Russie.

She is author or co-author of numerous publications: *Tchernobyl, retour sur un désastre* (2007); «Ukraine, une terra incognita en Europe», *La Règle du jeu*, n° 57 (mai 2015); *Traverser Tchernobyl* (2016, 2022); *La Seconde guerre mondiale dans le discours politique russe* (2016); *Le régiment immortel — La guerre sacrée de Poutine* (2019, 2022); *La force de vivre* (2020); *Tchernobyl – Vivre, Penser, Figurer* (2021); «Lumière sur l'Ukraine», *La Règle du Jeu*, n° 77 (October 2022); *Le Livre noir de Vladimir Poutine* (2022).



Leila Bičakčić is one of the founding members of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN), based in Sarajevo. CIN specialises in reporting on corruption, finding a nexus between the political elite and organised crime groups, and monitoring the use of public funds and of politicians' assets. Its stories led to the indictment against a former prime minister, the dismissal of an international judge and an indictment in a major corruption case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which resulted in a binding court decision. CIN has won a number of national and international awards for its work, including the Daniel Pearl Award and the Shining Star Award. Most recently, CIN's story on vote buying was shortlisted for the European Press Prize as Europe's best story on corruption in 2021. Leila's responsibilities include overall management, investigative project planning, analysis and strategic development. A special focus of her work is research into new models of sustainable media organisation and new business models in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the transition from traditional media to new digital models and the convergence of media content. A Sarajevo native, Leila studied basic physics and economics at the University of Sarajevo.



Séamus Boland has been the President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group since October 2020. His policy and political interests include the eradication of poverty, social exclusion and inequality. In addition to the Group presidency, he holds several other roles outside the EESC. He has been CEO of Irish Rural Link since 2001, a Board Member of Inland Fisheries Ireland since 2018 and Chair of Peatlands Council since 2012. Mr Boland is a farmer and has worked in civil society for over 40 years, including with young people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people living in rural isolation. From 2007 to 2013, he was a member of the first Press Council of Ireland. He is a trained Speech and Drama Educator.



Adnan Ćerimagić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is European Stability Initiative's (ESI) Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans and is researching EU policy on the region. Before joining ESI in August 2013, Adnan worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo and Brussels. He also did a traineeship in the Secretariat of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, and worked for the European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (ETC) in Graz. He studied law at the University of Graz and EU international relations and diplomacy at the College of Europe in Bruges. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the International Institute for Peace in Vienna and the International Advisory Board of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. Adnan is based in Berlin.



Andrea Čović Vidović is an expert in EU affairs, diplomacy, communication, management and mentorship. She is Head of Media at the European Commission in Croatia and led Public Relations at the European Parliament in Croatia for nine years before that. After working on Croatia's EU membership negotiations, she managed EU sectors at the Croatian Ministries of Finance and Labour and Pension System. She holds a Master's degree in Contemporary Languages (University of Zagreb) and in European Studies (University of Sussex). She did her PhD research in Comparative Politics at the University of Zagreb and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Relations.



Marika Djolai (PhD, University of Sussex) is the team leader/key expert on the European Commission's Global Exchange on Religion in Society project. Previously, she was senior researcher and head of the Conflict and Security cluster at the European Centre for Minority Issues. Marika holds master's degrees from the University of Novi Sad and University College London, and received her doctorate in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. She is a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG). Her academic research focuses on community dynamics, post-conflict development, minority rights and securitisation. Her policy work is oriented towards the EU accession of the Western Balkans countries, bilateral dispute resolution, religion, and civil society.



Ivana Dragičević is editor-at-large at N1 Television, an exclusive CNN affiliate for the Adria-Balkan region, where she was previously executive producer of news programmes and executive editor of international news. She began her career at Croatian public TV broadcaster HRT where she held several positions, including foreign affairs correspondent and chief correspondent in Belgrade. A multiple award-winning reporter, her work has focused on European and international affairs for more than twenty-five years. She has received three annual awards as best TV journalist from the Croatian Journalists' Association (1999, 2001, 2013) and an award from HRT for best TV reporting (2010). She has interviewed a number of global public figures, from Bashar al-Assad to Jens Stoltenberg, from Amin Maalouf to Bob Geldof. Ms Dragičević is also Europe's Future Fellow at Vienna's Institute for Human Sciences (IWM)



Christine Dugoin-Clément is associate researcher at the “Risks” chair of the IAE Business School Paris 1 and at the AI observatory of the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. A former auditor at the French Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence, she has been studying Ukraine for 10 years. Based on field observations, her PhD focused on decision-making in extreme situations under the effect of informational strategies, particularly on influence and informational warfare. Simultaneously, she works on IT and defence topics in the light of strategy. She is the author of *Influence and manipulation, from modern military conflicts to modern economic wars*.



Dušan Gajić is a journalist, documentary author and founder of the production company SEETV. Dušan is also a European correspondent for Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and a co-founder of the production group Mreža in Belgrade. Documentary films by Dušan Gajić include the award-winning *The Graduates* (2021), *The Promise* (2016), *The Long Road through Balkan History* (2010), *Kosovo Diary* (2008), *Greetings from Kosovo* (2006) and *Attention: Culture!* (2007). Since 2004, Dušan has been closely following and reporting on all major issues related to Balkans/Serbia-EU relations as a Brussels correspondent (in 2004-2005 for RTV B92 and from 2006 for RTS.) He graduated in Yugoslav and World Literature from the University of Belgrade in 1998.



Régis Genté is a freelance journalist and an expert on the former USSR. Based in Tbilisi, Georgia, since 2008, he covers Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia for several French media outlets including RFI, France24 TV and Le Figaro. He has also authored or co-authored several books, including the recent *Volodymyr Zelensky, dans la tête d'un héros* (Volodymyr Zelensky, in the mind of a hero), 2022; *Futbol, le ballon rond de Staline à Poutine* (Football from Stalin to Putin), 2018; *Poutine et le Caucase* (Putin and the Caucasus), 2014 and *Voyage au pays des Abkhazes* (A journey to the land of the Abkhazians), 2012. In addition, Mr Genté contributes to think tanks such as the French Institute for International Relations, the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Foundation for Strategic Research; and works as a business intelligence consultant specialising in political and geopolitical analysis, reputation and due diligence.



Igor Grozdanić is an energy expert, energy economist and energy policy analyst. Educated in Germany, he holds MSc degrees in both electrotechnics and macroeconomics, as well as a BSc in Electrical Technology. His area of work includes green energy transition, renewables and energy geopolitics. His interests focus on the role of gas in energy transition and a low-carbon economy, integration of renewable energy sources, energy poverty and decarbonisation. He has worked as a consultant on different energy, environmental and low-energy projects run by the Council of Europe, World Bank and energy companies. He advocates for a common energy and climate strategy and firmly believes that energy poverty has to be urgently eliminated. He is the author and co-author of 30 scientific and expert papers in the area of energy and the energy economy, published in Croatia and abroad. In 2002, he won the Hrvoje Požar award for a dissertation in the field of energy. Igor is the executive director for energy and strategic projects at the Croatian company Turbomehanika d.o.o.



Alexander Kleinig is the EESC's Director for Communication and Interinstitutional Relations. Mr Kleinig is Austrian and previously worked at the European Parliament, first in legislative work and then in communication. In 2005, he was appointed project manager to set up a European Parliament Visitors' Centre in Brussels, which has grown to be the largest parliamentary Visitors' Centre in Europe, attracting 350 000 visitors per year and winning 16 different design and communication awards. He then became Head of the Concept and Design unit, where he developed several Europe-wide communication campaigns, including part of the 2019 European election campaign ("thistimelmvoting"). Mr Kleinig joined the EESC in 2022 and has a master's degree in economics from the University of Vienna.



Zion Lights is a British science communicator known for her work in environmental advocacy and journalism. She is founder of the evidence-based climate activism group Emergency Reactor and a former spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion. Zion founded and edited Extinction Rebellion's print climate reporting newspaper, The Hourglass, which at its height reached a distribution of 180 000 copies. Zion speaks regularly at events around the world on the need for evidence-based climate solutions and an end to energy poverty, as well as the importance of science. Much of her work now involves busting myths around clean energy sources, particularly nuclear energy. She is also author of *The Ultimate Guide to Green Parenting*. Zion is active on Twitter (@ziontree) and her website is www.zionlights.co.uk



Cillian Lohan was elected Vice-President of the European Economic and Social Committee in October 2020, and has been an active member of the institution since 2015. He is a leader in the field of the Circular Economy and was the inaugural chair of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, which he helped to establish. Cillian has extensive experience as a delegate to the UN, working on initiatives such as the COP climate negotiations and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. As CEO of the Green Economy Foundation, he has overseen ambitious projects, including the planting of over one million trees in Ireland and the establishment of a wildlife reserve in Tobago. Cillian graduated from University College Cork and the University of Ulster with a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Science.



Mila Moralić is an editor and reporter at N1 television, a regional news channel and a CNN affiliate. With 20 years of experience in journalism, she has hosted broadcasts and special coverage events, participated in round tables and seminars around the world and taught classes on a wide range of subjects, including democracy and the rule of law, voting, minority rights and pluralism. Ms Moralić holds a master's degree in comparative politics from the University of Zagreb and is a Fulbright scholar, having spent a year as a Hubert H. Humphrey fellow at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Arizona State University in the United States.



Domagoj Novokmet is a journalist focused on politics and business, and a senior editor and anchor for N1, a leading Croatian news channel and regional CNN affiliate. Before joining N1, he spent more than 20 years at the national public broadcaster HRT, where he headed a number of departments, including the News and Current Affairs programme. He also spent time as acting director-general; during his tenure, in 2012, HRT made a big step forward by launching two new TV channels, HRT3 (culture) and HRT4 (news channel). Mr Novokmet was also an executive committee member at CIRCOM, an association of European public broadcasters. He was a Journalist of the Year nominee in 2019 (HND, a Croatian journalists' association), and in 2020 he won the "Hrvoje Mateljić" award for TV business journalism.



Augustin Palokaj has been a senior Brussels correspondent and columnist for Croatian daily newspaper Jutarnji list for more than 22 years. He writes reports, commentaries, columns and interviews about the EU and NATO, particularly on enlargement, foreign affairs and security issues. He has covered major international events like the EU and NATO enlargement and reforms, debates on the new EU treaties and on the EU Constitution. Between 2007 and 2013, he worked for the WAZ Media group, an international multimedia company based in Germany. Many of his articles were published in several German newspapers, as well as in the French weekly Courrier International. He reported on events in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Albanian, Croatian and English language sections of the BBC World Service radio. He covered the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. His articles were also published in several newspapers and on web sites such as the Croatian daily Večernji list, the Institute for International War and Peace Reporting IWPR, Lobi, Korrieri, Radio Free Europe and WDR. He holds a Master's degree in Journalism.



Jaroslaw Pietras is currently Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. From 1990-2006, he served in his native Poland as Secretary of State in the Ministry of Finance, Secretary of State for Europe and Head of the Office of the Committee for European Integration. From 2008-2020, he worked as Director General at the Council of the European Union, covering a broad range of policy areas (climate change, environment, transport, telecom, energy, education, culture, audio-visual, youth and sport). Holder of a PhD in Economics from the University of Warsaw, he is the author of a number of publications on the EU, sustainability and trade issues. He has also been a Fulbright Foundation scholar and a member of the board of think-tank BRUEGEL (2008-2011).



Marin Piletić was born in 1983, in the city of Novska. After completing elementary and high school in his hometown, he graduated from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, where he obtained his university degree in Croatian Language and Literature and History. He began his career as a teacher of the Croatian language in primary schools in Novska and Lipik. In the 2009 Croatian municipal elections, he was elected deputy mayor of Novska, a position he held until 2013. The following year he was elected deputy county prefect for Sisak-Moslavina County and worked in Sisak until 2017, when he ran as a candidate and was elected mayor of Novska, winning a majority of votes in the first round of elections. After being re-elected mayor in the 2021 municipal elections, he became a member of the Croatian Parliament in June 2021. In April 2022, he was appointed Minister of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy. He is married and the father of two children.



Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu has been President of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship of the European Economic and Social Committee since October 2020. He has been a member of the EESC and its Employers' Group since 2007. Mr Plosceanu is involved in activities across all sections of the EESC, and is currently also the EU Chair of the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee. In 2016, Mr Plosceanu became Vice-president of UGIR, the Romanian Industrialists' General Union. Since 2007, he has been President of ARACO – the Romanian Association of Building Contractors. Mr Plosceanu has technical, economic, law and defence qualifications.



Viktoriia Romaniuk is visiting professor at Madrid's Carlos III University, deputy director of the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism in Ukraine, deputy director of the StopFake project and editor of its Russian service. A media expert, Ms Romaniuk has been a participant and speaker in international conferences on propaganda and media influence organised by the likes of the OSCE and NATO. She is a member of an international scientific group that has been developing a higher education programme for Ukrainians preparing for careers in government communication as part of a U.S. State Department-funded initiative. She is also a member of the working group Learn to Discern, a new educational programme for the development of media literacy.



Oliver Röpke has been the president of the EESC Workers' Group since March 2019 and an EESC member since 2009. Currently sitting in the Social Affairs and Citizenship (SOC) and Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT) sections, he has been rapporteur of several opinions. He has also been a member of the EESC Bureau and president of the Permanent Study Group on Social Economy Enterprises. Mr Röpke has been the head of the Brussels office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) since 2008, a member of the federal executive board, ÖGB representative in the ETUC and a member of the Social Dialogue Committee. He holds a degree in law from the University of Vienna.



Christa Schweng has been the President of the European Economic and Social Committee since October 2020. She has been an EESC member for 22 years, working as rapporteur for many opinions. Her previous functions within the EESC include president of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship and chair of the Labour Market Observatory. Ms Schweng gained deep expertise in social and employment issues working as an advisor both at EU level and in her native Austria. Outside the EESC, she works for the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. She has been a member of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work since 1995 and has held every three years the rotating presidency of the Board of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work since 2001. She chaired the SMEunited Social Affairs Committee between 2001 and 2009. Christa Schweng holds a master's degree in law from the University of Vienna. Twitter: @EESC_President



Violeta Simeonova Staničić has been the Head of the European Parliament Office in Croatia since its opening in 2013, the year when Croatia joined the EU. Previously, she managed the European Parliament Office in Bulgaria, was in charge of communication and media projects in the private and public sectors and worked as a contributing author and commentator for regional and international media, including Time Magazine. She holds a master's degree in political science from Northeastern University in Boston and a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Sofia. Upon finishing her studies, she began her career as a reporter from the Bulgarian parliament, at a time of major transitional changes in the country.



Clare Taylor is a science communicator, journalist, and policy analyst whose work centers on communicating ideas and policies for a better world. For the past ten years, she has lived in Brussels, working on media, advocacy and communications for sustainable energy and environment-related topics. Her clients include national governments and public agencies, European institutions, NGOs and industry associations. She is a co-founder of the Global One Health Community and she holds a master's degree in engineering science from Oxford University. As a former magazine publisher, she enjoys skillful communications, wicked problems and well-plotted thrillers.



Tim Weber is Head of Editorial and an executive director at Edelman, the world's largest communications firm. He leads a team of ex-journalists supporting clients by telling their stories with an editorial approach. He is an expert in communications, economics and the technology industry. Before joining Edelman, he was the business and technology editor for the BBC News website, which he helped to launch in 1997. For three years, he also was the BBC's business editor for programmes on three national radio networks. He started his journalistic career with the BBC World Service. He holds a PhD from the Free University Berlin, with a thesis focusing on strategic studies and international relations.



Hrvoje Zovko has been a journalist since 1995 when he started as Zagreb correspondent for the daily paper "Glas Slavonije". In 1997, he began working as a correspondent for the daily paper "Novi list". He joined the national public broadcaster Croatian Radio Television (HRT) in 1998. He covered war crime trials in Croatia and Serbia as well as reports on the army, police and judiciary. In 2004, he attended a documentary film school in Montpellier, France. From 2008 to 2010, he was the HRT correspondent from Serbia and reported on the unrest in Kosovo. His journalistic assignments include reporting from Afghanistan and covering the Manchester bombing in 2017. He worked as desk editor and editor on domestic politics for HRT's News programme. In 2018, he became executive editor for the news channel HRT4. He is the author of several documentaries on the war in Croatia. In 2012, he was shortlisted for Journalist of the Year award in Croatia. He has been a member of the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND) since 1997 and headed the HND's Investigative Journalists' branch from 2012 to 2018. He has been president of the HND since June 2018.

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