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Dear reader,

As I write these lines, the **mid-term renewal of the EESC** is approaching: a good opportunity for a few thoughts on what has happened in the first term, and what we hope we will make happen in the second.

For the REX section, the **COVID-19 pandemic** was particularly challenging, as the lockdown prevented us from meeting our counterparts in the rest of the world, with a loss of human contact and direct interaction. And yet, we succeeded in keeping things moving: this was absolutely necessary, considering the unprecedented speed at which the world is now changing.

We had started the first term advocating **multilateralism**, progressive free trade agreements and the green and digital transitions, and had set as priorities **Africa, the Neighbourhood and enlargement, international trade and climate diplomacy**. A series of crises forced us to adapt: the first emergency was of course **Russia's invasion of Ukraine** and its attempt to enslave a nation and violently shift the international order in favour of autocracy. The return of war to Europe has had a deep impact on civil society, with the Ukrainians fighting for freedom and the Europeans doing their best to help, first by welcoming millions of refugees and then by accompanying the attacked country on its way to self-defence, reconstruction, and EU membership.

We also set up a new task force on **Belarus** and one for the **Indo-Pacific**: we need to monitor the situation, and to give civil society's feedback to the EEAS and the other EU institutions on the situation in those areas. Also, we underlined the importance of **soft power**, with an accent on **cultural, economic, climate and health diplomacy**, not to forget the issue of **migration**. Europe is at the crossroads between different continents, peoples, and superpowers, and we need to promote our ideas of a fair international order and a more stable planet.

For the next period, we will keep working along those lines, knowing that there will be other files to be dealt with: **Central Asia** is crucial for the stability of the largest continent and needs help to develop its infrastructure; the **Arctic** is a new geopolitical theatre due to the melting ice cap, and needs to be protected from further environmental damage and predatory policies; **water resources** are getting scarce and **deep waters** in the oceans are threatened by deep-sea mining; the **Great Lakes** region in Africa needs to be stabilised after years of civil wars; and **SMEs** around the world are subject to a process of internationalisation which is changing the economy and the distribution of GDP in the world.

We will consider these emerging challenges in the **opinions** drawn up by our section, and aim to hold more **meetings outside Brussels** so as to have a better understanding of the situation on the ground. We also intend to intensify our cooperation with the Economic and Social Councils of the **United Nations** and of the **African Union**, as well as with other organisations such as the **Arctic Council**.

During the new term, I will continue devoting all my efforts to a REX section that delivers **timely and useful opinions** with real **added value** for the progress of Europe and its civil society. I know that I can count on all **section members** to help us succeed in this endeavour.



Yours sincerely,

**Dimitris Dimitriadis**  
REX Section President

## Ukraine and EU civil society



### Ukraine: the EESC adopted its third resolution

On 23 February, the first anniversary of Russia's criminal invasion of Ukraine, the EESC's plenary session adopted its third resolution on Ukraine, entitled [Ukraine: One year after the Russian invasion – the European civil society perspective](#).

In the resolution, the EESC supports **Ukraine's accession to the EU** in full respect of enlargement principles. In line with the European Parliament's position, the Committee also supports the creation of a **special international tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine** and the imposition of **sanctions against the Russian Federation**. Moreover, the EESC emphasises that the EU must do everything in its power to

prevent war fatigue and has the moral obligation to support Ukraine whatever it takes and for as long as it takes.

Regarding **Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery**, the resolution acknowledges that the task will be immense and states that preparations must start now, in order to build a competitive economy that embraces the green, digital and just transitions. To this end, the Committee calls for the **involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations** in devising, implementing and monitoring the reconstruction and recovery plans: it is necessary to support Ukrainian businesses and to re-establish social dialogue even under martial law.

In this regard, the EESC recommends **setting up a mechanism to empower Ukrainian civil society**, by providing funding and facilitating its participation in EU civil society networks, as well as by supporting the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform. The budget under **Erasmus+** for Ukraine should be expanded in 2024, and more **traineeships and exchange opportunities** are needed within the EESC and other EU institutions.

## Events



### The EESC on the Western Balkans and Kosovo

The 55th meeting of the EESC's Western Balkans Follow-up Committee took place on 29 March 2023 in Pristina, Kosovo\*. The event, chaired by Follow-up Committee president Ionuț Sibian, amounted to three distinct hearings held with local civil society organisations, which had an opportunity to express their views and concerns on the **role of civil society in Kosovo**. Discussions touched on a wide range of topics, including the 2023 **European Year of Skills** and its impact on skills, education and youth policy in Kosovo, the state of **social dialogue**, and effective ways to enable **civic space** in the country.

*\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*



### International trade: presentation on DAGs by EESC members at the EP's INTA Committee

On 21 March, the European Parliament's Committee on International Trade (INTA) hosted a **hearing on Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs)**, where DAG chairs Tanja Buzek, Stefan Padure, Elena Alfaro and Tom Jenkins provided an overview of the activities, achievements and issues facing their respective DAGs over the past two-and-a-half years.

The session was opened by **Tanja Buzek**, Chair of the EU DAG under the TCA (UK) and EESC DAG Coordinator, who presented the general key points such as the fluidity of DAGs in sharing best practices, which has broken down silos between the DAGs, and the TSD Review, resulting in many DAG-related action points and a sign of the Commission's attention and commitment. This general introduction was followed by contributions from **Elena Alfaro** (Central America DAG), **Tom Jenkins** (South Korea DAG) and **Stefan Padure** (Moldova DAG), who shared their own experiences, objectives and lessons learned. The debate featured several questions from the MEPs present, followed by the DAG chairs' replies.

Before the debate, Ben Van Peperstraete, from CNV Internationaal, presented the **first complaint ever** submitted in the framework of the Single Entry Point, on behalf of trade union organisations from Colombia and Peru, to address alleged violations of the Trade Agreement between the EU and these two countries.



### 31st meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee

The EEA Consultative Committee met in **Stockholm** on 14-15 March at the premises of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO). The meeting was chaired by co-chairs Ellen Nygren (EESC) and Kristin Hansen (EFTA).

After an introduction by REX president Dimitris Dimitriadis, the members adopted resolutions and reports on energy resilience in the EEA in view of the geopolitical situation, and the future cooperation of the European Political Community. The Consultative Committee also followed a presentation by Jørn Gloslie, Director of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the developments in the EEA Agreement and current EU/EEA EFTA issues. It also discussed the competitiveness and resilience of the single market with Eva

Sjögren, a representative of the Swedish presidency of the Council of the EU.

At the end of the meeting, the EEA CC issued a [joint statement](#) emphasising the importance of close cooperation between the EEA EFTA states and the EU in times of geopolitical uncertainty.



### **EESC mission to United Kingdom**

From 6-8 March, following the [Information Report on the Implementation of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement](#), an EESC 5-member delegation (Jack O'Connor, Tanja Buzek, Stefano Mallia, Cillian Lohan, and Klaas Johan Osinga) visited the UK to meet a number of **Scottish representatives**, including Angus Robertson, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Neil Gray, Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development.

On 8 March, the EESC delegation visited the **House of Lords** in London. The EESC members also visited the **EU Delegation to the UK**, where they had a discussion with Nicole Mannion, Deputy Head of Delegation, and with colleagues in charge of different aspects of EU-UK relations.

The main purpose of these meetings was to present the main findings of the information report, and to have an exchange on issues such as the **Windsor Framework, citizens' rights and youth mobility**. All exchanges were accompanied by a discussion of how relations between UK and EU civil society could be strengthened, since this could make a considerable contribution to enhancing the overall relationship between the UK and the EU.



### **Georgian civil society takes to the street to defend European perspective**

On 3 March, the [EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform](#) adopted a [statement concerning two proposed laws on the Transparency of Foreign Influence](#) that the Parliament of Georgia had started scrutinising. The proposed laws, largely considered as inspired by Russian repressive legislation, concerned civil society organisations (CSOs) whose activities are dependent on grants received from foreign sources, including the EU, international organisations and international

financial institutions. These CSOs would have been obliged to declare themselves "**agents of foreign force**" in a separate registry and would have been subject to a special monitoring regime.

The EU-Georgia CSP expressed its firm view that the proposed laws restricted human rights and discriminated against CSOs, including trade unions and employers' associations, as well as media organisations, and that the draft laws were in complete contradiction to the principles of EU law, posing a serious threat to Georgia's European ambitions. Therefore, the CSP, a joint body, including both members of the EESC and members of Georgian CSOs, established under Article 412 of the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, **called on the Parliament to withdraw the two draft laws.**

A few days later, following an **appeal by Georgia's president Salome Zourabichvili** and what may have been the largest **street protests** in Georgian history, the parliamentary majority promised to withdraw the draft legislation.



EU Domestic Advisory Group  
under the EU-Japan Economic  
Partnership Agreement

#### **EU-Japan Joint Dialogue with Civil Society (JDCS)**

On 3 March, Japanese and European civil society met for an online joint dialogue to discuss **trade and sustainable development**. Cross-cutting topics included due diligence and corporate social responsibility initiatives aimed at preventing violations of human and labour rights. Concerns were expressed on the way rules are designed, in particular on legal certainty and on the traceability of companies across the whole global supply chain.

On **trade and the environment**, participants discussed carbon prices and challenges on the Japanese side regarding the introduction of a new voluntary carbon-pricing scheme which would be the equivalent of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM): a level playing field must be ensured in these types of measures. Concerning **climate change**, it was highlighted that social dialogue was needed to promote a green and just transition. Civil society could provide input to government authorities on this matter. On **trade and labour**, it was emphasised that further discussions were needed on the fundamental International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including the new ones on occupational health and safety.

Feedback from civil society could help to advance on the different topics under the trade and sustainable development chapter of the EU-Japan EPA. In the discussions, both sides made reference to **mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence obligations**, which could be a topic for future action between EU and Japanese civil society.



### **16th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee**

On 2 March, the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) met in **Podgorica**, Montenegro. The meeting covered the state of play in EU-Montenegro relations, highlighting that most of the recommendations from the Joint Declaration adopted at the last meeting in April 2022 had remained unanswered. The JCC also noted the country's limited progress in the EU accession negotiations during the past year, as confirmed by the findings of the **European Commission's 2022 Montenegro Report**.

In particular, the discussion revolved around the **fundamentals of the accession process**: the judiciary, fundamental rights, functioning of democratic institutions and justice, freedom and security. The JCC stressed that the **ongoing reforms against corruption and organised crime** must comply with commitments made and with recommendations by international organisations.

On the **situation of civil society** in Montenegro, the JCC stressed the importance of the involvement of independent CSOs in all aspects of policy-making and in the EU accession negotiations, and highlighted their role in improving the overall democratic environment in Montenegro through their activities and advocacy. A [joint declaration](#) was adopted and will be distributed to all relevant EU institutions and Montenegrin authorities.



### **New Chinese Ambassador in Brussels**

On 13 February, **Dimitris Dimitriadis**, president of the External Relations Section, met Ambassador **Fu Cong**, Head of the Chinese Mission to the EU. They discussed, among other issues, the relations between the EU and China and the next steps in the EU-China Round Table, which is the bilateral

cooperation mechanism between the EESC and the China Economic and Social Council (CESC).



### Youth Action Plan to involve youth worldwide: Next step – implementation!

On 8 February in Brussels, the EESC held a hybrid public hearing entitled [YAP to youth worldwide: Next step – implementation!](#), in the framework of opinion [REX/566](#) – **Youth Action Plan in the EU external action**. The Youth Action Plan (YAP) adopted last October by the Commission and the High Representative is a policy framework for a strategic partnership with **young people** around the world to build a more inclusive and sustainable future. The EESC hearing focused on the implementation of YAP and was divided into two sessions. The first session was aimed at hearing the views of international organisations and social partners on the matter, while the second gave the floor to youth representatives from around the globe.



### Exploratory mission to Israel and Palestine

From 7-9 February, a delegation led by EESC President Christa Schweng went on an exploratory mission to **Jerusalem, Ramallah and Tel Aviv**. During the mission, our president met, among others, the EU Representative for the West Bank and Gaza Strip; UNRWA; the Head of the EU Delegation to Israel; Israeli and Palestinian government officials; Israeli and Palestinian civil society organisations; and representatives of the Israeli and Palestinian Economic and Social Councils.

The mission had three objectives: 1) assess the civic space for civil society organisations in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; 2) evaluate the role, functioning and representativeness of the Economic and Social Committee of Israel (ESCI) and of the Palestinian Economic and Social Council (PESC); and 3) draw conclusions regarding the future composition of Israeli and Palestinian delegations at the annual Euromed Summits and at other EESC activities.

The mission found that the ESCI and the PESC should do more to **include independent NGOs** and to engage civil society organisations from both sides in **cooperation with each other**. The delegation proposed to invite counterparts from the EESC's Group III to the annual Euromed Summits in addition to

already established members of the two bodies, as the Summit represents an excellent opportunity for informal meetings between Palestinian and Israeli delegations.



### Latin America and gender equality

The REX section meeting of 31 January was dedicated to Ukraine, the priorities of the Swedish presidency, and **Latin America and the social and economic recovery of the region, with a special focus on the situation of women and gender equality**. The meeting saw the online participation of female speakers representing various sectors of Latin American society. During the debate, it was underlined that the EU needs to strengthen its ties with Latin American partners in all areas, including political dialogue, trade, and development cooperation: in 2023 both parties should take advantage of the favourable momentum to strengthen the existing relations.

A **strong Mercosur** will be key for a successful partnership with the region as a whole: the EU supports the bloc's efforts towards regional integration and cohesion-building in its political, economic and social dimensions. Inclusiveness and encouragement for the participation of civil society are crucial in order to strengthen our partnership. Finally, it was noted that the recently finalised negotiations on the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement (AFA) prepare the ground for deep integration and create valuable and balanced opportunities for both sides.



### EESC mission to the UN Partnership Forum

From 30-31 January, an EESC delegation led by EESC President Christa Schweng went on a mission to the UN Partnership Forum held in New York.

The mission had **two objectives**: 1) participating in the Partnership Exchange organised by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and in the ECOSOC Partnership Forum; and 2) meeting with the leadership of the UN ECOSOC and other UN high-level officials to consolidate the structural involvement of the EESC with the UN ECOSOC and with the UN system in general. During the mission, our president had meetings with high-level officials, including the

ECOSOC president Ambassador **Lachezara Stoeva** and UN Under-Secretary-General for Policy **Guy Bernard Ryder**.

A possible avenue towards more structural relations could be through a memorandum of understanding between the EESC and DESA acting as secretariat of the ECOSOC, as well as through the possibility for the EESC to join some of the major groups cooperating with the UN. Structured involvement of the EESC with the UN in the framework of the implementation of the UN report ***Our common agenda*** was also discussed. The mission was organised with the support of the EU Delegation to the UN in New York.



### Meeting of the EU-ACP Follow-up Committee

From 12-13 January, the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee met in Brussels to discuss **civil society participation** in the Economic Partnership Agreements, the **circular economy**, **youth** in ACP countries and the **Indo-Pacific strategy**.

Another meeting, co-organised with the Economic and Social Council of Portugal, was held from 16-17 March in Porto. Several high-level speakers took the floor, including the EESC president and the president of the Portuguese ESC, the Secretary-General of the OACPS, the two co-chairs of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, and the Presiding Officer of the African Union ECOSOC.

The discussion focused on civil society participation in ACP-EU relations and on the future of these relations, including the **Global Gateway** and **water challenges**. During the meeting, the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee adopted a [statement](#), notably calling for a swift signing of the **Post-Cotonou Agreement** and calling on the Council of the EU to find a solution to the current deadlock.

### Opinion in the spotlight

[REX/565](#) – **Forced labour products ban** (adopted on 25/01/2023)

At its January plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on the [Forced labour products ban](#). The EESC welcomes the European Commission's proposal for a regulation banning products made with forced labour from the EU market. The Committee supports the proposal to issue guidelines to assist companies with identifying, preventing, mitigating and bringing to an end any risk of forced labour in their operations and value chains.

Furthermore, the EESC highlights the importance of transparency and open access to information for companies, competent authorities, organised civil society and the general public, and proposes to introduce a benchmarking system as part of the database – the core instrument of the ban. The EESC also stresses that, at national level, organised civil society has a central role to play in combating all forms of forced or compulsory labour.

Finally, the EESC asks the Commission to study the feasibility of a **public EU rating agency for environmental and social sustainability, as well as for human rights in the business context** and calls for EU support for a **binding UN treaty** on business and human rights, as well as for consideration to be given to a possible **ILO convention** on decent work in supply chains. [Watch more](#)

#### **[REX 561](#) - The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth** (adopted on 25/01/2023)

All modern EU trade agreements since Korea (2011) include chapters on trade and sustainable development (TSD), with mutually agreed commitments on environmental and labour standards. The recent Commission Communication on the TSD review [The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth](#) identifies priorities and actions to further enhance the effectiveness of the current engagement-based approach to TSD.

The EESC supports the comprehensive review setting a new benchmark on TSD and welcomes the fact that the Commission took up a number of its recommendations in the action points, in particular on **reinforcing the role of civil society and of the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs)**. The latter could be further strengthened at the level of both agreements and implementation, but the EESC regrets that no action is being taken to involve civil society more thoroughly during the negotiation process.

EESC rapporteur Tanja Buzek emphasised the need for **clearer and more detailed TSD provisions** to help trade partners better understand what is expected of them. It is also regrettable that the **just transition** was not made an overarching concept, despite its official recognition in the Paris Agreement.

#### **[REX 562](#) - The EU Strategic Compass** (adopted on 25/01/2023)

The EESC opinion on [The EU Strategic Compass](#) calls for an expansion of the current concept of security and for a reflection on strategic interdependence. The Committee believes that the Compass should further involve civil society, which can contribute to building greater resilience against hybrid attacks and the systematic undermining of cohesion and solidarity within and between the EU Member States by inimical powers.

Furthermore, the EESC affirms that, so far, the EU and NATO have not fully harnessed the potential of their cooperation. Finally, the opinion calls on the EU to take more responsibility and create a **European Defence Union** as the European pillar of NATO, and states that, while the EU advocates peace and for considering the use of military power as a last resort in conflict prevention and resolution, it is essential that the EU is able to defend itself robustly when necessary. [Read more](#)

## Opinions adopted at the March and April plenary sessions

[REX/566](#) - Youth action plan in the EU external action

[REX/574](#) - Specific rules relating to medicinal products for human use intended to be placed on the market of Northern Ireland

[REX/575](#) - Specific rules relating to the entry into Northern Ireland from other parts of the United Kingdom of certain consignments of goods

## Ongoing opinions and information reports

[REX/555](#) - Energy policies and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region

[REX/570](#) - Water Politics: Between desertification and securitization - Time for a Blue Diplomacy

[REX/571](#) - Strengthening multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of civil society contribution to the UN system

[REX/572](#) - Global battle of offers – from the Chinese Road and Belt initiative to the EU Global Gateway: the vision of European organised civil society

[REX/569](#) - EU Climate Diplomacy

## New REX brochure

The last version of the **REX brochure** dated back to 2017. There is now a new updated version, which you can find on the [EESC website](#). You can also ask the REX secretariat for your paper copy!

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