



REX newsletter | The EESC in the world

Issue No 6

April-July 2023

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Dear reader,

In recent months, and even more so with the beginning of the new mandate, the REX section has opened up new strands of activity. The recent Euromed Summit was dedicated, alongside the digital and energy transition, to **water**, a topic the whole EESC is working on in 2023 and which is expected to become more and more important in the future.

Water is becoming a **scarce resource**: demand for it is growing, and the problem is getting worse because of climate change. This is now felt even in the EU; however, the effects are felt much more acutely in places such as the **Mediterranean**, where temperatures are rising 20% faster than the global average. Less water means more displacements of people and more international tensions: since 2010, there have been more than 466 conflicts worldwide over water control, most of them in Africa and the Middle East. It is clear that we need **blue diplomacy** to prevent conflicts and make international cooperation on water a reality.

Wise policies under the banner of **multilateralism** can make an enormous contribution to multifaceted problem-solving: ensuring better cooperation on the energy transition with the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, for example, can reduce these countries' carbon footprint and fight climate change, empower their economies, and help the EU to reach the goals set under the Green Deal.

Indeed, the Mediterranean countries have one of the highest potentials for **clean-energy production** in the world: thanks to new technologies that have made solar and wind power more profitable than fossil fuels, they could help Europe phase out oil and gas imports. This new form of cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean could also avoid creating economic problems for the southern shore once the EU has stopped importing fossil fuels.

The same mutual need for significant cooperation applies to our relationships with **Central Asia**: the five post-Soviet era countries want to diversify their international relations and stop depending too

much on Russia and China. They need our help to build infrastructure, avoid water crises, and ensure their democratic, social and economic development more generally. The EU is very keen on working with Central Asia, and the **Global Gateway** is a perfect tool in this respect. While the Commission has been signing partnership and cooperation agreements with the five countries (only Turkmenistan is missing to date), the EESC has also started work: we have already initiated contact with **Kazakh civil society**.

The implementation of the Global Gateway is also a key topic in our contact with our **African partners**, whom we met at the EU-Africa Meeting of Economic and Social Stakeholders, as well as in our contact with our **Latin American** partners participating in the summit between the EU and the Community of the Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). It is crucial to show our partners that, in the current global battle of offers, a model based on democratic values and respect for the environment has a better chance of boosting their sustainable development!

Another hot topic is the fight against **disinformation**. Convinced of the importance of mobilising civil society to counter this phenomenon, the REX section held a dedicated conference in Sofia. The event, organised in conjunction with the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council and supported by an awareness-raising campaign on social media, is the first in a series that we want to launch in order to engage everyone in the struggle for an objective information system that contributes to an **open democratic debate**.

We will keep you informed of further developments.



Dimitris Dimitriadis
REX Section President

Ukraine and EU civil society



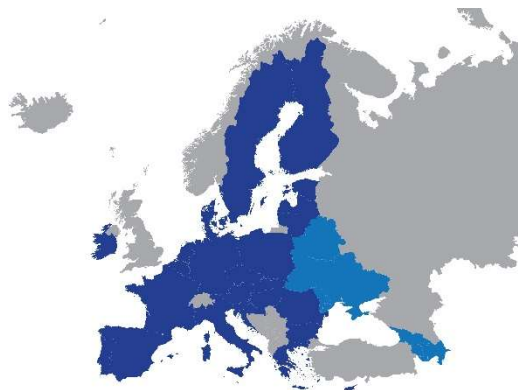
The **13th meeting of the [EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform](#)** took place on 3 July 2023 in Brussels.

The discussions highlighted the significant progress made in implementing the Association Agreement and the seven steps for EU membership outlined by the European Commission. Emphasis was put on the crucial role of civil society in Ukraine's path towards the EU and appreciation was shown for the EESC's

support and commitment towards Ukrainian civil society. However, a call was made to increase this further once accession negotiations between Ukraine and the EU begin.

The platform also discussed the challenges and possibilities for Ukraine today and in the context of the post-war reconstruction, with a special focus on green recovery, energy, the environment and employment. A [Joint Declaration](#), prepared by both sides, was discussed and subsequently adopted at the end of the meeting.

Events



Forthcoming joint meeting of all civil society platforms

Following an initiative of the REX president, Dimitris Dimitriadis, the EU civil society platforms (CSPs) of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia will meet, for the first time ever, in a joint event entitled the **Eastern Neighbours' Platforms Civil Society Day**.

The meeting, to be held on **11 September 2023** at the EESC, will bring together EU and partner civil society representatives from the four countries, with a view to discussing cross-cutting issues such as enhancing the

role of civil society in national decision-making and increasing the visibility of the work of the CSPs. In addition, two thematic sessions are planned: one on the fight against disinformation and the other on the European Year of Skills.



Euromed meeting in Alexandria

The 27th **Euro-Mediterranean Summit of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions** was held in Alexandria, Egypt, on 5-6 July 2023.

Co-organised by the [Euromed Follow-up Committee](#), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) secretariat, the Anna

Lindh Foundation and Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the Summit provides civil society organisations from the UfM Member States with a platform to debate common challenges and opportunities and to exchange best practices.

This year's event revolved around the **energy transition** in the Euro-Mediterranean region, due to the region's great capacity for renewables and to the potential of successful north-south cooperation in the area of clean energy sources. The topic of **water scarcity and desertification** was also discussed, given the Mediterranean region's strong exposure to this phenomenon. The role of the **digital transition** as an important vector for inclusive economic development and job creation was also analysed.

The 2023 Summit is closely linked to upcoming opinions REX/555 on [Energy policies and strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region](#) and REX/570 on [Water politics – Between desertification and securitization – Time for a Blue Diplomacy](#), as well as with opinion REX/549 on [Digital transition in the Euro-Mediterranean region](#), the latter adopted in 2022.



EU-Central American DAG-to-DAG meeting

On 27-30 June, the 8th EU-Central America joint meeting of civil society Domestic Advisory Groups (DAG) and Civil Society Dialogue Forum took place in San Salvador.

The meeting of 27 June focused on the priority areas in monitoring the implementation of the

Association Agreement, the exchange of good practices and the adoption of a [Joint Declaration](#). The **Civil Society Dialogue Forum** held on 28 June was an opportunity for exchanges on the challenges of the social dialogue in the region, good practices and challenges in sustainable supply chains, with a focus on agri-food chains.

On 29 June, the DAGs participated in a **joint workshop on the new instruments of EU trade-related sustainability legislation**, where experts presented the *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism*, the *Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive*, the *Deforestation-free Products Regulation* and its *due diligence rules*, and the *Regulation banning products involving forced labour*. Additionally, the DAGs heard a presentation on the key objectives of the **EU Global Gateway initiative in Central America** and a presentation of the **Commission's Staff Working Document on the Ex-post evaluation of the trade pillar of the EU-CA Association Agreement** delivered by DG Trade.

Finally, the delegation met with the **head of the EU delegation in San Salvador**, H.E. François Roudié, and with the representatives of the **European chambers of commerce and trade officials** from the EU Member States' embassies. Dedicated meetings were held with local **human rights defenders** and **women's rights organisations**, including exiled activists from Nicaragua, who shed more light on the complex situation of democracy and human rights in the region.





Transatlantic relations: civil society contribution to the UN system

On 23 June, a **study group hearing** took place in the framework of the preparation of an **own-initiative opinion** on [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](#).

A wide panel of expert speakers took part in a lively debate with the members of the study group around the broad dynamics and the current status of the **United Nations**.

They stressed that while the UN remains the only framework for global solutions to mounting current challenges, its system faces many challenges itself. The importance of **civil society's coherent and structured contribution** was emphasised. Specific proposals and recommendations were put forward as reflexion points for civil society to be better included, for the EU to make full use of its resources, and for the UN to fully reclaim its leading role in addressing pressing global challenges.



Central Asia: new contacts with Kazakhstan

On 14 June, a delegation of civil society from **Kazakhstan** visited the EESC. The five-person delegation, representing a youth organisation and academia, among others, met **Markus Penttinen**, chair of the EESC's EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-Up Committee, and **Dumitru Fornea**, EESC member who participated in the 4th EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in March.

The EU has signed an **Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA)** with Kazakhstan, in force since 1 March 2020, which provides for civil society consultation. On that basis, the Kazakh delegation expressed its interest in structured cooperation with the EESC. The two parties agreed on the importance of discussing topics like energy cooperation, infrastructure and the Global Gateway, water management, human rights, and the situation of civil society in Kazakhstan. Topics such as social and labour rights, cooperation on raw materials, and the recent establishment of a consultative council (the National Kurultai) were touched upon during the meeting.

The EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-Up Committee will propose to draw up an **own-initiative opinion** and a **fact-finding mission** on the situation of civil society in Kazakhstan, in order to explore how to structure future contact and cooperation.

After the meeting, the Kazakh delegation attended the EESC's plenary session. Upon returning home, its members reported on their visit extensively on TV and online media, both in Kazakh and in Russian.



Citizens against disinformation in Bulgaria

According to a Eurobarometer survey, 55% of Bulgarians think they have been often exposed to disinformation and fake news. Bulgaria is therefore at the top of the list of EU Member States when it comes to citizens feeling most exposed to disinformation. Responding to this threat requires **everyone's engagement**: from **journalists** working in paper and online media, radio and television, who produce the information on offer, to **citizens**, who are its consumers and need to be empowered and conscious of the choices they make, not to mention the **regulatory authorities**, whose task it is to create the appropriate framework for the delivery of factual, unbiased and accessible information.

These are among the main conclusions of the conference entitled [Citizens can defeat disinformation. Civil society for an open democratic debate](#), organised by the EESC in cooperation with the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council. The conference took place on **12 June in Sofia**, at the premises of the European Commission's representation, and was attended by a wide audience, including students from two different universities. Seven EESC members were also present and participated in the debates.

The conference also saw the launch of a one-week awareness-raising **campaign on social media** that the REX section is now considering repeating in more countries, both EU Member States and candidates to enlargement alike.



30 years of local democracy agencies in the Balkans

ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy – is a global alliance of local and regional authorities and civil society actors working together through a participative approach for resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities.

On **9 June**, ALDA held a [Roundtable discussion on "30 Years of Local Democracy Agencies in the Balkans"](#), involving **Dragica Martinović**, vice-president of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, who spoke on behalf of the EESC. The event featured speakers from the Western Balkans region and the European Parliament, and covered, among other things,

building and supporting local democracy in the Balkans, and security and European integration in the region.

In her intervention, which touched on post-conflict struggles and the European integration of the Balkans, Ms Martinović shared the rich experience of the EESC in cooperating with organised civil

society from the Western Balkans, and expressed the EESC's wish to enhance the cooperation with ALDA in the future.



Western Balkans Follow-up Committee: work done and work to come

The 56th meeting of the EESC's Western Balkans Follow-up Committee took place **on 6 June** in Brussels.

This was the **inaugural meeting** in the new 2023-2025 term. On this occasion, the members of the Follow-up Committee discussed the end of term report for the previous term of office (2020-2023), the draft programme for the current term (2023-2025), as well as the preparation of the **9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum** that will

be held on 19-20 October 2023 in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Moreover, an overview and assessment of the activities of the EU-Montenegro and EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) and prospects for the EU-Albania and EU-North Macedonia JCCs were conducted.



Serbia: leading civil society actor released from detention

Boško Savković is a Serbian writer and producer, who also co-chairs the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), a platform established in 2013 between the EESC and Serbian civil society. Mr Savković was detained by the Serbian authorities **on 5 June**, following peaceful protests in Belgrade.

He was accused of carrying a banner that included an effigy of President Aleksandar Vučić hanging with a string around his neck. Mr Savković is the third journalist arrested after taking part in the **Serbia Against Violence** protests, which began after the mass shootings in a Belgrade elementary school and in two villages outside the town of Mladenovac.

The EESC president, **Oliver Röpkke**, and the REX section president, **Dimitris Dimitriadis**, strongly condemned the arrest of Boško Savković, whom they characterised

as a man of conviction and integrity whose main objectives are the well-being and prosperity of his country and its citizens. They urged the Serbian authorities to properly investigate Mr Savković's case with a view to his immediate release. Furthermore, the EESC stressed that the "fundamental values of

freedom of speech and assembly cannot and should never be compromised, even when they do not align with the government's positions".

Mr Savković was conditionally released **on 7 June**.



The EESC at EP hearing on the United Kingdom

On 25 May, **Tanja Buzek**, chair of the EU Domestic Advisory Group (DAG) under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), addressed the AFET-INTA joint hearing on the implementation of the TCA.

Ms Buzek stressed the **unique nature of the EU DAG's role**, especially regarding the level playing-field, and highlighted the ongoing collaboration with the UK DAG and DG Trade. Pointing to the initial DAG-to-DAG meeting and the Civil Society Forum (CSF) in October 2022, she emphasised the joint commitment to mutual collaboration expressed in the chairs' joint statement, as well as the ongoing efforts to engage with the EU-UK

Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.

Ms Buzek also noted the fruitful relationships with the EU delegation in London and the UK mission in Brussels. With regard to the **TCA Implementation Report**, she stressed the need for improvements in the Civil Society Forum format and on institutional engagement. As the level playing-field and the Retained EU Law Bill take precedence, she advocated for an increased focus on cooperation and improved channels for addressing implementation and regulatory divergence. She also encouraged greater transparency and two-way communication between the EU DAG and the European Parliament.



First meeting on transatlantic relations under the new mandate

The [Transatlantic Relations Follow-up Committee](#) chaired by its new president, Peter Clever, held its inaugural meeting on **15 May**. The meeting addressed the **state of play of transatlantic relations** within the prism of the current geopolitical context, the need for multilateral answers, obstacles in transatlantic relations, including the Inflation Reduction Act, as well as the need for increased dialogue between civil

society on both sides of the Atlantic and consistent inclusion of civil society in transatlantic bodies such as the Trade and Technology Council and Trade and Technology Dialogues.

In its second part, the meeting dealt with the very timely and crucial subject of **overcoming qualified labour force shortages** on both sides of the Atlantic through dual occupational education. Members engaged in a lively discussion with the representative of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), as well as with renowned experts on the subject, who all contributed specific examples of action and recommendations for the future.



European and Serbian civil society on media freedom and the rule of law in Serbia

On 21 April, the [EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee](#) (JCC) held its 15th meeting in Brussels to discuss the current state of play in EU-Serbia relations and accession negotiations with the EU as well as the state of **media freedom** and the **rule of law** in Serbia.

After a formal opening by EESC president Oliver Röpke and Dimitris Dimitriadis, president of the REX section, H.E. Ana Hrustanović, head of the Mission of the Republic of Serbia to the EU, presented the current status of EU-Serbia relations and Serbia's path towards the European Union. A panel of journalists and advocates discussed the promotion of media freedom in Serbia, generating enriching and animated exchanges on the matter.

The JCC adopted a [joint declaration](#) calling on the Serbian authorities to make clear efforts to foster media freedom in the country, to publicly condemn all threats and attacks against journalists, and to adequately hold their authors accountable. Watch more [here](#).



Trade Committee mission to Geneva

On 20-21 April, the International Trade Follow-up Committee carried out its **annual mission** to Geneva. The Committee had meetings with high-level officials from the World Trade Organization (WTO), such as the Deputy Director General, Ambassador **Jean-Marie Paugam**, and several chairs of WTO committees such as the Trade & Environment Committee and the Trade & Development Committee.

The discussions focused on the progression of the WTO's main open dossiers ahead of the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13), with WTO representatives sharing cautious optimism that MC13 would build on the successes of MC12. The challenge remains to enhance the WTO's responsiveness and inclusivity, particularly for developing countries and civil society.

The Committee then met Ambassador **Maria Pagán**, Deputy US Trade Representative, and **David Bisbee**, Deputy US Chief of Mission. The discussion touched upon bilateral EU-US relations in the multilateral and especially the WTO context. Particular attention was paid to the **Dispute Settlement Mechanism**, with the interlocutors explaining the US position and expressing hope for a positive

outcome of its reform. Both sides agreed on the need for better outreach to and involvement of developing countries and civil society.

The Committee also held a roundtable at the EU Permanent Mission involving the EU Ambassador at the WTO, **João Aguiar Machado**, and representatives from UNCTAD, academia and civil society organisations. The two panels focused on, firstly, the EU's complex balancing of open strategic autonomy and the multilateral aspects of sustainable development, and, secondly, ways to "break the bubble" and better involve developing countries and civil society in the multilateral trading system.



2023 All-DAGs meeting

On 17 April, the 3rd **annual All-DAGs meeting** took place just before the end of the 2020-2023 mandate to take stock of the main achievements and challenges. The discussions were grouped around four priority areas, namely labour, the environmental agenda, engagement with partners, and issues of DAGs going beyond the sustainable development chapter, in order to identify common challenges and best practices.

Denis Redonnet, Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO), stressed the importance of these meetings and of communicating to the public about how the engagement of civil society structures is making a difference on the ground: "We need to work together to communicate the work, the legitimacy and acceptability of the EU trade agreements, their values and objectives".

Maria Martin-Prat, Deputy Director General for the Commission's DG Trade, highlighted the results achieved by the DAGs over the last two and a half years as well as their active role during the TSD review and in the follow-up to it. **Saskia Bricmont**, Member of the European Parliament sitting on the International Trade Committee (INTA), flagged the importance of the human rights dimension in free trade agreements, and also stressed that the inclusion and involvement of civil society is key in order to make trade agreements more acceptable to European citizens.

Concluding the meeting, **Tanja Buzek**, outgoing chair of the EESC's International Trade Follow-up Committee, proposed to bring all trade parties together in a TSD conference, providing an opportunity to discuss the autonomous measures and all related topics broadly with the active involvement of civil society. As she said: "The work of the DAGs is a marathon, not a sprint".

Opinions in the spotlight

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

On 3 May, the EESC hosted a study group and a public hearing in the framework of its own-initiative opinion encouraging the EU to adopt a comprehensive strategy of climate diplomacy by setting short and long-term priorities aimed at tackling climate change and its consequences. The hearing gathered suggestions on improving the effectiveness of EU climate diplomacy. Discussions focused on the geopolitical repercussions of the European Green Deal on business actors, on fostering dialogue on climate change-related opportunities and risks, and on the potential to enhance cooperation on climate change with EU partners. Discussions also focused on empowering EU civil

society, their role in the green transition, and the potential implications of the EU's leading role in climate diplomacy. The second study group will take place on 5 September 2023.

REX/576 – Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats

On 13 June, the EESC held the first study group meeting and a technical hearing for the opinion on the EU Maritime Security Strategy, which responds to the Commission's [Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats](#). The opinion aims at delivering suggestions on how to enhance the EU Maritime Security Strategy in all its dimensions, including stepping up activities at sea, cooperation with partners, leadership in maritime domain awareness, risk and threat management, capabilities enhancement, and education and training. To this extent, it will gather insights into the current challenges for the maritime security agenda and discuss how civil society can best contribute to the implementation of the proposed action plan. A second study group meeting was held on 3 July 2023.

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

[REX/576](#) - Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats

[REX/573](#) - EU Global Health Strategy - Better health for all in a changing world

Revamped REX website

The REX website has been updated, as a pilot project for the wider revamp of the EESC website. The new geographical structure of the REX site and its search engine by bodies make it much easier to retrieve information. Check it out at www.eesc.europa.eu/rex.

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