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**REX Work Programme**

*(Activities for1 January 2022 – 31 December 2022)*

# **MAIN OBJECTIVES AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES**

The general objective of the EESC's Section for External Relations (REX) is to express the views of organised civil society on all aspects related to the **EU's external action and the Common Foreign and Security Policy** (CFSP) of the EU.

In practice, this concerns the EU's foreign policy at large, focusing on four major pillars: **enlargement, trade, neighbourhood**, and **development.** The REX Section aims to promote a favourable framework for the activities of civil society organisations, to establish and improve direct contacts with civil society organisations and to support and strengthen civil and social dialogue in non-EU countries and regions.

This work is increasingly framed by the many international political and economic agreements the EU concludes with third countries.

The REX Section is attentive to the **priorities established by the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council** in order to ensure consistent and supportive action by organised civil society.

It is therefore necessary to update the REX Section work programme to reflect new priorities established by the EU institutions and new fields of activity related to **international climate and energy diplomacy, international aspects of EU global connectivity projects such as the Global Gateway, the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the adoption of the EU Strategic Compass and the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific and the Central Asia region.**

This work programme focuses on 2022, in order to illustrate the type and number of activities REX organises in any given year. In geographical and thematic terms, the REX Section will prioritise issues related to: 1) **EU neighbourhood**; 2) **international** **trade**; 3) **Africa** as part of the ACP; and 4**) climate and energy diplomacy.** Developments in transatlantic relations and in Latin America will be closely monitored. The Section will also evaluate the prospects for developing activities regarding the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia regions in line with the priorities of the Commission and the EEAS.

The REX Section will pay special attention to specific horizontal issues concerning the external dimension of internal EU policies. Beyond stated priorities, work might involve additional new activities in relation to the implementation of the CFSP, migration and asylum policy and the link between European civil protection and humanitarian aid operations. Specific section meetings will be organised on these issues in relation to the adoption of the opinions on "Responding to state-sponsored instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU's external border" and "Improvement of the EU capacity to act in case of extreme events outside of its territory".

Travelling activities will have to take into account the current COVID-19 pandemic.

# **LEGISLATIVE WORK**

The Section's legislative work (opinions and information reports) will be consistent with the work planned by different REX standing bodies, the Section's institutional obligations, the Commission Work Programme, the referrals of the Council presidencies, the work of the Commission and the European Parliament and the EESC president's international priorities. Specific attention will be given to:

* the development of the Eastern Partnership policy with a particular focus on Belarus;
* the importance of a just digital transition, with a particular focus on the EU's Southern Neighbours;
* the situation in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on youth and innovation policy;
* the revision of the Cotonou Agreement (the new OACPS);
* the implementation of the European Green Deal and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, where necessary in cooperation with the NAT and TEN Sections, with a particular focus on issues related to a sustainable climate and energy diplomacy, a just energy transition, and the importance of water in external relations;
* the implementation of the EU Global Gateway Strategy and the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and their impact on relations with Asian countries;
* the capacity of the EU to react to extreme events outside its territory;
* the Global Strategy for the CFSP and the adoption of the European Strategic Compass;
* the implementation of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council;
* the monitoring of implementation and enforcement of EU trade and association agreements by the dedicated EU Domestic Advisory Groups and civil society bodies;
* issues related to developments concerning the potential establishment of a Multilateral Investment Court;
* the geopolitical, economic and social impact of the post-COVID recovery, particularly in the regions most affected by the pandemic such as Latin America; and
* the importance of cultural diplomacy in international relations.

# **3. EXPECTED NEW WORK IN PRIORITY AREAS**

This section summarises expected new work in priority areas, mentioning some of the key activities. Depending on their nature, some of these activities will be conducted by the relevant REX bodies; others will take place at Section level due to their horizontal nature, importance, link to legislative work or absence of a dedicated REX body. The list is not exhaustive and could be modified in order to reflect new international developments and changes in priorities.

**3.1. EU neighbourhood (with a particular focus on the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership)**

The stability and prosperity of the EU neighbourhood is key for the future of the European Union. Enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans and strengthened partnerships with our neighbours to the East and South have always been a priority for the EU. The upcoming French Presidency has specifically mentioned the Western Balkans as a priority area.

The Section will continue its well-established activities and dialogue with partners in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood.

In the wake of Brexit, the COVID-19 crisis and the increased impact of climate and energy challenges showed that the EU needs to work together with all of its neighbours, including the UK, Turkey and the EEA EFTA countries, despite some difficulties in relations and internal problems in some of these countries.

The REX Section is planning a number of activities aimed at the EU neighbourhood countries. The activities will be developed through the dedicated bodies or at Section level.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2022:**

* Inaugural meetings of the EU-North Macedonia and EU-Albania Civil Society Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) (*depending on the EU Council decision on the opening of first chapters of accession negotiations*);
* Two to four Follow-up Committee meetings related to the EU neighbourhood – Western Balkans, Euromed, Eastern Partnership, UK, Russia;
* Fact-finding mission to Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-2);
* High-Level Western Balkans Conference (Czech Republic);
* Meetings: EU-Montenegro, EU-Serbia and EU-Turkey JCC;
* Opinion on youth and innovation in the Western Balkans;
* Conference on Belarus;
* Information report on media freedom in Belarus and photo exhibition on Belarusian political prisoners;
* Work regarding the establishment of EU-Armenia civil society platform under the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement and exploratory mission to Armenia;
* Meetings: EU-Moldova, EU-Georgia and EU-Ukraine Civil society platforms and Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs), EU-UK DAG and inaugural meeting of the EU-Morocco Joint Advisory Group in Marrakesh;
* Participation of a REX delegation in the annual Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
* Exploring potential cooperation with the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC);
* Participation in Three Seas Initiative meetings, in cooperation with the ECO Section;
* Euromed Summit in Marrakesh;
* Information reports on digital transition in the Euro-Mediterranean region and on energy policies and strategies in the Mediterranean region;
* Co-organisation of a conference with the Italian National Council for Economics and Labour on energy policies and strategies in the Mediterranean region, to be held in Rome;
* Two coordination meetings with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Secretariat and participation in relevant UfM events;
* Participation in the Mediterranean Week of Economic Leaders (MedaWeek 2022);
* Co-organisation of, and participation in, the Brussels Civil Society Forum (MAJALAT);
* Involvement of the Euro-Mediterranean Disability Rights Network in the activities of the Euromed Follow-Up Committee;
* European Economic Area Consultative Committee (EEA CC) meeting in Bergen, Norway;
* EEA CC Bureau Meeting.

**3.2. International trade**

Many developments in the international trade order that started in 2021 will continue in 2022: the reform of the WTO towards more sustainability and efficiency; the early review of the 15-point action plan on the EU’s Trade and Sustainable Development chapters ("TSD Review"); and close collaboration with the EU Chief Trade Enforcement Officer. Expectations are high and the challenges manifold. The REX Section will seek to raise the views and concerns of civil society in all these areas. It will also work towards communicating more effectively on international trade and its positive or negative impact on people and businesses and will call for further involvement of civil society in international trade, in particular at WTO level.

Monitoring the implementation and enforcement of trade agreements by civil society will remain a key focus area. The Section will continue to closely monitor EU trade negotiations, currently underway at bilateral and regional level, and their subsequent ratification process. The REX secretariat will continue to provide the administrative and policy support for Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) and further develop an overall platform for an improved All DAGs coordination, by addressing horizontal challenges such as resources and crosscutting topics. The Section will also follow the WTO work and reform process, by participating as a civil society advisor in the WTO Ministerial Conferences or actively contributing through organised working sessions at the annual WTO Public Fora.

***ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2022:***

* Conference on International trade and Sustainability, in cooperation with the French Presidency of the Council and the European Commission;
* Organisation of REX Section meetings on digital trade and on the role of civil society throughout trade agreements (*postponed to 2022 – see opinion link below*);
* Drafting and adoption of an opinion on a New framework for trade agreements advocating for more transparent trade negotiations;
* Drafting and adoption of an opinion on the New EU-US trade and technology Council;
* Drafting and adoption of an opinion on Multilateral investor-state arbitration court: assessment of the UNCITRAL process and its achievements in light of civil society recommendations;
* INT/REX webinar on Sustainable supply chains and reshoring;
* Four meetings of the EESC International Trade Follow-up Committee;
* Participation in the WTO Public Forum and the (postponed) WTO Ministerial Conference ("MC12") in Geneva;
* Two to four meetings per EU DAG, with related DAG-to-DAG meetings and joint workshops (in total +/- 50 meetings for the 12 DAGs currently active - EU-Cariforum Joint Consultative Committee, EU DAG for Korea FTA, EU DAG for EU-Central America FTA, EU DAG for the EU FTA with Columbia, Peru Ecuador, EU DAG for EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic Agreement, EU DAG for E);
* 2 meetings of the EU-Korea Joint Advisory group
* One All DAGs meeting and ad hoc meetings of All DAG Presidencies (*on request*);
* Cooperation with WTO Secretariat on exploring ways to make civil society involvement at WTO level more effective.

**3.3. Africa as part of the ACP policy**

The African continent is a strategic partner of the EU and its Member States and one of the main priorities of the Von der Leyen Commission (2019-2024). It is also one of the main international priorities of the French Presidency of the Council during the first half of 2022. President Macron has indicated that relations between EU and Africa are "the great political and geopolitical project of the decades to come".

The Section strategy will be based on the following core objectives:

* ensuring civil society ownership, with a particular emphasis on African organised civil society in relation to the future Comprehensive Joint EU-African Union Strategy;
* promoting core commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including fundamental labour and gender rights, and ILO Conventions, including the implementation of projects related to the EU Global Gateway Strategy;
* protecting respect for human rights and rule of law in African countries affected by conflicts and migration flows (South Sahel, Horn of Africa, Western and Central Africa);
* ensuring that civil society, including social partners, plays a role in the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which encompasses 54 African nations in Northern Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and Western Africa.

***ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2022:***

* Providing civil society recommendations at the sixth AU-EU Summit to be held in February 2022;
* Developing cooperation with the African ECOSOC, including capacity building regarding procedures for the drafting of opinions;
* Advocating a prominent role for civil society in the future European Union-Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) Partnership Agreement and in the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs);
* Organising a fact-finding mission to Ivory Coast in order to assist civil society in setting up civil society monitoring of the EU-Ivory Coast Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA);
* Drafting and adopting an opinion on Analysis of the role of organised civil society in the new agreement between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), including the situation of the EPAs in this framework;
* Drafting a study on the revision of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) EPA States;
* Participating in the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly;
* Two meetings of the ACP-EU Follow-up Committee;
* Promoting a cultural exhibition by an African artist, to be held at the EESC.

**3.4. Climate and energy diplomacy**

The launch of the European Green Deal in 2019 poses new challenges and goals for EU climate and energy diplomacy. The Green Deal is the most ambitious plan so far for the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement.

The geopolitical impact of the climate and energy transition will require existing international institutions to adapt in order support trade and rules-based international cooperation. Negotiations are ongoing for a reform of the Energy Charter Treaty so as not to contradict the goals set by the Paris Agreement and the Green Deal and efforts are needed to modernise the WTO so that it incorporates environmental commitments in its multilateral trade agenda, and to support trade and technology exchanges related to renewable energy.

All these issues are closely linked to the work of the External Relations Section. Developing stable networks with civil society in third countries can be an important tool in promoting EU climate and energy diplomacy in support of a just transition; this aim was demonstrated during the meeting of the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee and the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum in 2021. The EESC conference on the Geopolitics of the Green Deal also showed the importance of civil society involvement in climate and energy diplomacy in order to preserve the competitiveness of the EU and not leave anyone behind.

The REX Section needs to follow these developments as they will also affect the implementation of major EU strategies such as the Global Gateway and the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific. The Sections will also participate in cross-section activities related to this topic.

***ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2022:***

• Drafting and adoption of an opinion on the geopolitical impact on energy transition;

• Section meeting on the energy transition;

• Drafting and adoption of an opinion on the EU Global Gateway Strategy;

• Streamlining of subjects related to energy and climate diplomacy in the work of the REX bodies and EU DAGs;

• Follow–up of issues related to energy and climate diplomacy in EU trade agreements and at the WTO;

• Cooperation with international organisations on climate and energy diplomacy.

**4. EMERGING ISSUES AND CRITICAL CAPACITY TO DEAL WITH NEW PRIORITIES**

A number of emerging issues which deal with the geopolitical impact of EU internal policies such as migration and the European Defence Union are acquiring additional importance in the work of the Section, including in our relations with civil society in the framework of the REX bodies and in the support we give to the work of domestic advisory groups.

The EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and the EU Global Gate Communication also mark a shift in EU action with regard to the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia. The REX Section has limited contacts with civil society in the region and there is a need for additional work on mapping and evaluating the benefits of engaging further with civil society in this part of the world.

The REX Section's Secretariat will need more staff if it is to deal effectively with emerging issues and address new priorities that may arise during the year, including possible crisis situations in priority regions. The development of the work on emerging issues and on new priorities will be subject to the Section's ability to deal with them.

**4.1. Implementation of CFSP and European defence**

Since the publication of the EU’s Global Strategy in 2016, Member States stepped up their defence cooperation through initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Despite these major steps forward, the EU and its Member States urgently need to work on developing the required capabilities to act as a union, so that the EU assumes its responsibility as a global player and a reliable partner for democracy, the rule of law and a free multilateral world order. A new perspective is needed for European defence cooperation and it will be provided through the upcoming Strategic Compass.

In this respect, it is important that civil society also plays a role in the EU's CFSP. We need to establish a formal cooperation between the EESC and the EEAS to carry out an evaluation from the civil society point of view of the CFSP. The REX Section will organise a Section meeting on foresight in external relations, which will discuss the need of EU open strategic capacity for the future of Europe. The Section is also supporting the organisation of a high-level dialogue with VP HR Borrell on the EU Strategic Compass.

European foreign and security policy and defence is also strongly linked to cooperation with partners, to developing the EU's capacity to cooperate with like-minded partners and to improving the EU strategic capacity. Therefore, in this context, the Section will also give priority to the organisation of civil society activities related to the US Summit for Democracy and to the drafting and adoption of an opinion on the EU's capacity to act in case of extreme events outside of its territory, as requested by the French Presidency of the Council. The REX Section will also closely follow issues related to hybrid threats for the EU that can destabilise our societies such as disinformation, cyber-attacks and economic pressure. The REX Section will cooperate closely with the EESC Consultative Commission for industrial change (CCMI) and the EESC Section for Single Market, Production and consumption (INT) on any activities related to defence.

**4.2. External aspects of migration**

The external aspects of migration are becoming increasingly important. The French Presidency of the Council is aiming to work on updated mobility framework that takes into account the issue of migration, combining reflection on legal migratory channels and appropriately managing migration that is not covered by international, national or EU legislation. This approach requires increased cooperation with third countries. The crisis with Belarus, in which we have seen the emergence of a new hybrid threat with the state-sponsored exploitation of people for political ends, is an example of the external threat that migration poses to European security and stability. Such practices by third countries can also endanger EU and universal values. Natural disasters in third countries, water scarcity and climate change-related migration will also present an growing challenge for the EU in the coming years.

The REX Section will continue to work with the EESC Section for Employment, Social affairs and Citizenship (SOC) to assess how civil society and REX bodies can help strengthen the external dimension of the EU’s asylum and migration policy and improve cooperation with third countries in the field of migration.

The Section will follow possible new EU initiatives, such as action plans, partnerships, dialogues, strategies or roadmaps on migration with third partners. The Section will give priority to the drafting of an opinion on Responding to state-sponsored instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU external border and will organise a high-level conference with the European Commission on external aspects of migration.

**4.3. Mapping of civil society structures in South-East and Central Asia and possible added value for increased cooperation with civil society**

The EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was adopted on 16 September 2021. It sets out the EU's vision for the whole region.

The EU Strategy on the Indo-Pacific is an invitation to stakeholders from the EU and the region to address common challenges together. The REX Bureau has decided to establish an ad hoc taskforce of three EESC Members responsible for the Pacific in the framework of the ACP Committee. However, the EESC does not have a specific body covering the strategic importance of South-East Asia, including relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is a strategic partner of the EU in the region.

The EESC is following developments in some countries through its participation in Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) in EU trade agreements with Japan, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. The EESC is also working with China in the framework of the EU-China Round Table.

Equally, there are no specific EESC bodies following relations with Central Asia. This is problematic given the EU's current priorities as the region is one of the key factors in the EU Global Gateway Strategy and the Council Conclusions on "Water in diplomacy". The region is equally key due to a closer synergy between water, energy and climate diplomacy. As this is the case for South Asian region, there is an urgent need to map the civil society in the Central Asia region and to assess how it could be involved in common activities related to the implementation of the Global Gateway strategy and other activities related to energy, climate and water diplomacy.

There is a need to begin a strategic reflection on the EESC's engagement in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia regions in full compliance with the EESC Bureau paper of 28 April 2020 on future structures. This exercise should be accompanied by a mapping of the civil society structures in this region. In particular, it might be useful to reflect on whether the Russia Follow-up Committee and the Japan Follow-up Committee can widen their mandate to cover Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific respectively.

**4.4. Cooperation with International organisations**

The Section will work to maintain and strengthen its cooperation with a number of international organisations on priority files and will follow the work of these organisations which include: the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), the UNs Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the OECD.

The REX Section should also strengthen its cooperation with think tanks and institutes for international relations and foresight at EU and national level, in order to gather fact based and statistical information that can be useful for the purpose of drafting opinions, mapping civil society in third countries and planning new activities.

1. The name used here is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)