



**PRIORITIES OF THE SECTION FOR EMPLOYMENT,
SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP (SOC) FOR THE 2023-2025 HALF-TERM
AND ACTIVITIES PLANNED FOR 2023**

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and in view of the return of war to Europe, which have led to or contributed to increases in the cost of living and energy prices and strong inflationary pressures, **economic and social recovery** within the EU continue to be key priorities for the section over the 2023-2025 half-term.

In light of the green and digital transition and the need to ensure a just transition, **outlining the needed skills, new forms of work and working conditions and the impact of labour shortages continue to be important issues in the work of the SOC section.** The priorities will be to work for effective implementation of active labour market policies to **include economically inactive and unemployed people, fostering quality female and youth employment and entrepreneurship**, and also tapping into the potential of **economic migration and labour mobility**.

Two years after the Porto Summit, the **implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, equality** in all its facets, **poverty reduction, fundamental rights and the rule of law, migration, asylum and integration** will continue to be key elements of the section's activities.

The section will continue to draw on the work of its standing bodies – the **Labour Market Observatory (LMO)**, the **permanent groups on Immigration and Integration (IMI)**, **Disability Rights (DIS)** and **Roma Inclusion (ROMA)**, as well as the **Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)** – ensuring coordination of their activities and that their added value is fully captured in the section's work. The standing bodies should develop their activities during the half-term within the framework of the section's priorities, in view of the annual work programme and additional initiatives of the European Commission and in a spirit of seeking synergies between each other and with other EESC working structures. The section will also continue to enhance **cooperation with other sections** on transversal issues.

A new **European Parliament will be elected** in 2024 and a new **European Commission will be appointed. In the context of citizenship, this represents a key moment for European democracy, and the section will seek to play its role in promoting citizens' engagement in the elections to promote EU principles and values**, focusing on social and economic priorities to address the root causes favouring the rise of radical, extremist, populist, nationalist and far-right movements and parties. It will also contribute to the EESC's input into the new legislative period and the programme of the new Commission against this background, and will continue its good cooperation with the European institutions and also with the specialised agencies in the section's area of competence (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the European Agency for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), the European Labour Authority (ELA) and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

2. Priorities for the section

The priorities of the section for the 2023-2025 half-term will be:

- **Promoting Just Digital and Green transitions for social fairness, competitiveness and resilience**
- **Striving for an Equal and Inclusive Society**
- **Standing Up for Democracy, Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law**

These priorities will be completed with the **activities** described in the annex.

2.1 Promoting Just Digital and Green transitions for social fairness, competitiveness and resilience

In its remit, the SOC section will enhance its activities to make sure that the green and digital transitions lead to social progress and justice, sustainable growth, increased productivity and competitiveness and stable and secure jobs for all. Finding a consensus on how **transitions** can be managed in a just and fair way and ensuring that **no one is left behind** are key issues for the section, and matters on which it cooperates with other sections and observatories of the EESC.

EU support measures to address the consequences of the pandemic allowed people and labour markets to weather the crises, but large disparities still exist among Member States, regions, and between various groups in society, with growing poverty and persistent pockets of high levels of unemployment and inactivity.

Labour shortages are an obstacle to sustainable growth in EU countries impacting on companies' activities and social progress. They are multifaceted and vary depending on different national labour markets and economic contexts. In addition to **skills mismatches**, there is a need to cope with the implications of **generative artificial intelligence (AI) and speedy technological developments** and their impact on the world of work. At the same time, sectors with lower wages and poorer conditions are facing increasing shortages. Effective **life-long learning systems**, improved **anticipation of future skills needs** as well as **better quality jobs** are essential parts of possible solutions, supported by **strong and effective collective bargaining and social dialogue** in all Member States.

Against that background, the section will continue promoting a **new drive for quality and qualifying jobs in all sectors**. The section will respond to initiatives in this area, such as the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in the Semester process and the annual employment guidelines, and it will draw on the work of the **Labour Market Observatory**.

Given the rapid acceleration of digitalisation, the section will pay particular attention to the current state and **future of work in the digital era** – notably to working conditions, the safeguarding of collective rights and the strengthening of social dialogue in the **platform economy**, and to developments regarding non-standard work, artificial intelligence, algorithm management and robotisation. These issues will be a particular focus of the work of the Labour Market Observatory.

The section will continue promoting an **inclusive labour market** which removes barriers and gives particular support to the participation and progression of young people, women, older people, people with disabilities and those with a migrant or ethnic background. It will focus on the need for equal treatment of young people in the labour market and look at **transitions** from school to work and from job to job, starting from the analysis of the Commission's proposal on a Quality Framework for Traineeships.

Acquisition of skills for work, career paths and personal fulfilment, for good participation in society and implementation of the right to **lifelong learning** will be an important area of activity. In particular, **the European Year of Skills 2023** will be an opportunity to focus on effective solutions for young people and adults to equip them with the skills needed to successfully manage transitions in society and in the labour market. The section will draw on the work of the **Labour Market Observatory and its sub-group on the European Year of Skills** and will also work on important initiatives of the European Commission, such as on the recognition of qualifications of non-EU nationals. On its own initiative, the section will also examine the matter of education's impact on salaries, labour productivity and professional upskilling.

One particular focus will be on **health and safety**, notably on the implementation of the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027, with its 'vision zero' approach to eliminating work-related deaths in the EU and on occupational safety and health challenges in the new forms of work (starting from digitalization and telework patterns).

The SOC section will, within its competences, actively engage in actions supporting the implementation of the **Social Economy Action Plan**, notably initiatives relating to the labour market, education, skills and training, healthcare and care services. It will also engage in actions supported by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and in promotion of social innovation and social impact.

In all policies, the section will advocate the key role of a **strong and forward-looking civil dialogue, social dialogue and collective bargaining**. It will highlight good practices in green collective bargaining, which supports environmental protection and combating climate change, while taking account of their impact on the world of work. Through its Labour Market Observatory, it will promote democracy at work, a topic that will be considered as transversal in the observatory's work.

2.2 Striving for an Equal and Inclusive Society

The **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** serves as a beacon guiding us towards upward convergence, a fair and sustainable recovery and reaffirming our shared commitment to the European Social Model and its completion taking into account the changes in the world of labour and society. In light of the current socio-economic and geopolitical challenges, the implementation of the EPSR will continue to guide and inform the work of the section.

The section will particularly focus on **combating poverty and social exclusion** and on the impact of the ongoing crises, inflation and high energy prices on vulnerable citizens. As poverty levels and homelessness are on the rise, section will also address the issue of **homelessness** and support sustainable and inclusive housing policies. It will work with other sections and the CCMI in view of a Blue Deal for Water, paying particular attention to the issue of water poverty.

Health and care systems throughout the EU have been put under huge pressure by the COVID-19 pandemic, demographic change and ageing of the population. The section will work on the challenges related to resilience and sustainability of public health systems in the context of the European Health Union, the shortage of skilled health workforce, working conditions of health workers and formal and informal carers and healthy ageing. It will further work on the promotion of a European Care Guarantee aiming towards quality standards setting. It will also address mental health and the right to quality healthcare in the framework of the EPSR, with particular focus on vulnerable groups.

The **permanent group on disability rights** will continue to contribute to the periodic reporting of the EU to the UNCRPD Committee, while providing a participation platform for organisations representing persons with disabilities, raising awareness on the challenges they face and promoting good practices. The impact

of the double transition on persons with disabilities and the need to adapt their skills accordingly will be one of the key areas of work. The group will also closely follow up on the Commission's flagship initiatives linked to the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030 and monitor the implementation of the Strategy's flagship initiatives by Member States. The latter include the EU Disability Card, the Guidance recommending improvements on independent living and inclusion in the community and the Framework for social services of excellence for persons with disabilities.

Equality between women and men is one of the EU's core values and a prerequisite for achieving a fairer and stronger Europe. **Gender equality** will be addressed and mainstreamed in all facets of the section's work, in particular looking at the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans and gender-based policies and outcomes, as well as the gender pay gap. The section will tackle violence against women and girls and the gendered impact of the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, in cooperation with the EESC's Equality Group.

The section will continue focussing on **young people** and the challenges they face and contribute towards their meaningful and structured involvement in the section's work, thereby working towards providing a legacy to the European Year of Youth. It will seek to strengthen young people's perspectives through concrete work on youth issues, both via the work undertaken by the section's standing bodies and through opinions and initiatives planned under the EESC youth engagement proposal.

Migration, asylum and integration remain priorities due to their impact on demographic change, the economy and politics. The section and its permanent group on immigration and integration will focus in particular on improving safe, effective and legal pathways to labour migration towards the EU and a real and binding European Common Asylum System, working for the **socio-economic inclusion of migrants and refugees**. This will include EU policy and legislative proposals related to this issue with a specific focus on the proposed migrant and asylum directives and the southern and eastern border problems, examining best practice and success stories in cities and regions of Member States, and also the role civil society organisations play in ensuring such best practice and success. As youth representation is also a priority, attention will be paid to the challenges faced by **young people of migrant and refugee background in the workplace and in education and training, and how to improve their access and inclusion**.

The **permanent group on Roma inclusion** will continue to monitor the implementation of the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation in the Member States. Article 2 TEU provides that the EU is founded on "respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". Yet, many Roma still live on the fringes of society and face discrimination and antigypsyism. The group's work will focus on raising awareness on the Roma situation, identifying and drawing attention to situations of systemic exclusion against the Roma minority, monitoring Member States' integration and inclusion policies, and finding solutions to the difficulties faced by this community, with the participation of civil society and Roma organisations.

2.3 Standing Up for Democracy, Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law

The Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group (FRRL Group) will continue its work, started in 2018, of **relaying the voice of civil society** on developments concerning fundamental rights and the rule of law at national and European level, in order to strengthen the promotion of fundamental rights, including fundamental economic, social and cultural rights and the rule of law, as well as strengthening rule of law mechanisms and accompanying sanctions within the limitations of the current treaties and beyond.

A central issue for the section and the FRRL Group will be the **preservation of free civic space**, which is linked to the **operational and legal environment for civil society organisations** and the **protection of the**

socio-economic capacities of actors defending human rights (CSOs and activists, trade unionists, social partners, journalists, legal professionals etc.). Other issues to focus on will be the **participation and meaningful and inclusive consultation of organisations, human rights defenders and citizens**, as well as **participatory democracy**. The economic consequences when rule of law and fundamental rights are not respected will also be a focus of the FRRL Group.

Attention will also be paid to important new challenges, such as **disinformation** (including in the context of elections, notably the forthcoming European elections), **hate speech, discrimination, transparency** and the **impact of artificial intelligence**, as well as to the **root causes favouring the rise of radical, extremist, populist, nationalist and far-right movements and parties**, which the section will address with its work under the headings 'Promoting Just Digital and Green transitions for social fairness, competitiveness and resilience' and 'Striving for an Equal and Inclusive Society'.

The section will follow up on Commission initiatives, including notably the defence of democracy package, and will **focus on free and fair European elections**.

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INDICATIVE LIST OF ACTIVITIES UNDER THE THREE SECTION PRIORITIES
ENVISAGED FOR THE REMAINDER OF 2023

Key legislative files for the section in 2023 will be:

- *Reinforced quality framework for traineeships*
- *Defense of democracy package*
- *Recognition of qualifications of third-country nationals*
- *European Disability Card*

Activities envisaged in the area of health and care in 2023:

- *SOC/758 – Measures to fight stigma against HIV*
- *SOC/760 – Measures to improve mental health*
- *SOC/761 – Caregivers*
- *Enhanced follow-up to opinions related to care and the European Care strategy*
- *Enhanced follow-up to SOC/729 on Solidarity with rare disease patients*
- *Possible opinion on the Revision of the Council Recommendation on smoke-free environments (non-legislative, Articles 153, 168 and 292 TFEU, Q3 2023)*
- *Possible opinion on a Council Recommendation on vaccine-preventable cancers (non-legislative, Articles 168 and 292 TFEU, Q3 2023)*

Activities envisaged in the area of employment, working conditions and social dialogue in 2023:

- *SOC/721 – Equal treatment of young people in the labour market*
- *SOC/747 – Green collective bargaining*
- *SOC/756 – Proposal for a Social Progress Protocol*
- *SOC/767 – Strengthening collective bargaining power across the European Union*
- *SOC/777 – Employment guidelines*
- *SOC/769 – Education impact on work salary and labour productivity*
- *Activities of the Labour Market Observatory (LMO)*
- *SOC/754 – Ex-post Evaluation of European Social Fund 2014-2020*
- *Possible debate with the director of the European Labour Authority (ELA)*
- *Annual debate with the director of the European Agency for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)*
- *Annual debate with the director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)*

Activities envisaged in the area of education in 2023:

- *SOC/774 – Digital skills and education package*
- *Possible opinion on a reinforced quality framework for traineeships (non-legislative and/or legislative, Q2 2023)*
- *Possible opinion on a Council Recommendation on the updated learning mobility framework (non-legislative, Articles 165, 166 and 292 TFEU, Q3 2023)*
- *Activities in the framework of the European Year of Skills 2023*

Activities envisaged in the area of social policy in 2023:

- *SOC/757 – European Strategy for Older persons and conference on the strategy in Madrid (30/11/2023)*
- *SOC/763 – Access to water: tackling water poverty and its implication on social policy*
- *SOC/770 – The climate crisis and its effect on vulnerable people*
- *SOC/768 – For an EU framework for national homeless strategies based on the principle of "Housing First"*
- *Activities of the permanent group on disability rights*

- *Participation in the annual Conference of State Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and organisation of a side event.*
- *Activities of the permanent group on Roma inclusion*
- *Conference on the social dimension of the national recovery and resilience plans*
- *Conference on homelessness, linked to the adoption of SOC/768 For an EU framework for national homeless strategies based on the principle of "Housing First" (2023 Q4)*
- *An opinion on the European disability card (legislative, incl. impact assessment, Q4 2023)*

Activities envisaged in the area of gender equality, youth and child policy in 2023:

- *SOC/759 – Cooperation in the field of youth*
- *Possible annual debate with the director of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)*
- *Debates on gender equality in conjunction with International Women's Day, Gender Equality Week and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, in cooperation with the EESC's equality group*
- *Enhanced follow-up to SOC/728 on the EU Youth Test and other follow-up activities to the European Year of Youth 2022 including youth engagement activities envisaged under the president's manifesto*

Activities envisaged in the areas of fundamental rights and the rule of law, justice and citizenship in 2023:

- *SOC762 – Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy*
- *SOC/766 – How to engage with the intended public and how to effectively use the results of works of the citizens' panels?*
- *SOC/773 – Defence of democracy package*
- *SOC/775 – Initiative on transfer of criminal proceedings*
- *SOC/776 – Update of the anti-corruption legislative framework (trial phase new format of opinions)*
- *An opinion on the revision of the victims' rights directive*
- *Annual conference on the implementation on the Charter of Fundamental Rights*
- *Annual conference on the EC's Rule of Law report*

Activities envisaged in the area of migration in 2023:

- *SOC/772 – Multiannual strategic policy for European integrated border management*
 - *SOC/752 – Revision of the anti-trafficking directive*
 - *Annual meeting of the European Migration Forum, co-organised by the EESC and the EC. The 8th European Migration Forum will focus on migrant and refugees overcoming challenges to successful integration*
 - *Activities of the permanent group on immigration and integration (IMI), including on support for and integration of refugees and migrants from Ukraine*
 - *An opinion on the EC proposal for an EU Talent Pool (non-legislative and/or legislative, Q3 2023)*
 - *Possible opinion on the Digitalisation of travel documents and facilitation of travel (legislative, incl. impact assessment, Articles 77(2)(b) and (d) TFEU, Q3 2023)*
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