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**Oliver Röpke**  
President of the EESC

# **STAND UP FOR DEMOCRACY SPEAK UP FOR EUROPE**

**2023-2025 MANIFESTO**



**European Economic  
and Social Committee**

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Freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are among the fundamental values upon which the European Union is founded. They are enshrined in the EU Treaties and lie at the heart of the EU's identity.

Yet these values have come under great pressure in recent years. Europe has faced unprecedented crises, which amplified social and economic inequalities and put into question EU citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Our European values cannot be taken for granted.

In these testing times, the support of civil society in gathering the voices of European citizens is key to building democratic resilience and shaping the future of Europe. At the same time, civil society itself needs greater protection. The space in which civil society operates is increasingly shrinking, limiting the capacity of civil society organisations to do legitimate work in the EU and the rest of the world.

Throughout the next mandate, we at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) will step up our unique position as a gateway between citizens, civil society and EU institutions, acting as a true platform for honest and inclusive debate.

We will make sure that the doors of our house are open for a fact-based and meaningful democratic dialogue, involving a broad range of social, economic, political, cultural, and institutional actors. In our decision-making, we will strive for well-informed compromises that will strengthen the position of our Committee and provide a meaningful contribution to EU policies.

In doing so, we will – together with our institutional and civil society partners – make an important contribution towards a more resilient, more inclusive and more democratic EU that will inspire our neighbours near and far.

While focusing on these new priorities, our Committee will continue to **work at full speed to ensure social, economic, and environmental progress for all Europeans**, by consistently contributing to the European Commission's work programme and effectively cooperating with the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I want to focus on the following pillars:*

- ***Standing Up for democracy at home*** by promoting fundamental values and the rule of law, bringing citizens closer to our Committee by supporting representative and direct democracy, and ensuring the EESC's contribution to the success of the 2024 European Elections.
- ***Standing Up for democracy abroad***, by setting up a true Civil Society Gateway to democracy and prosperity for our neighbours and partners, and supporting strong and resilient EU civil societies.
- ***Speaking Up for Europe by making our Committee more representative***, involving new generations and under-represented members of our society in our work.
- ***Speaking Up for Europe by strengthening the quality of our outreach and our forward-looking work***, focusing notably on foresight and the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe, to ensure that the EESC remains a strong and meaningful voice in our European democracy.

# STAND UP FOR DEMOCRACY

## *At home*

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### Bring citizens closer

Since its birth in 1957, our Committee has been a pillar of participative democracy, providing a platform for citizens and stakeholders to raise their voice in the EU decision-making process. Participatory and deliberative democracy were discussed largely during the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), and citizens expressed their wish to have structural influence on the EU's Annual Work Programme and Policy Priorities, and that the EESC could play a crucial role in this respect.

The role of civil society in keeping a well operating democracy is absolutely essential. Participatory democracy is not only complimentary to representative democracy, but a constitutive element of it.

#### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- *Set up **participatory EESC citizen panels** ahead of the **European Parliament elections** in 2024, feeding into a cross-cutting resolution of all EESC Sections with the main demands of the EESC for the new European Parliament and the new European Commission ("The EESC 2024 Election Manifesto").*
- *Lay the foundations for the **regular use of participatory citizen panels** in the daily work of the EESC beyond the next European Parliament elections in 2024.*
- *Revitalise the active participation of the EESC in **European Citizens' Initiatives** as a successful instrument to involve citizens in the EU decision-making process and to give them a democratic stage to influence EU legislation.*

Participatory democracy flanks representative democracy (the European Parliament and National Parliaments) and direct democracy (European Citizen's Initiative). During my mandate, I will make sure to step up the Committee's position as a truly encompassing platform directed towards the future.

## Ensure the success of the European Elections

The new EESC mandate will pave the way to one of the cornerstones of European democracy: the European Parliament elections. The elections will mark a crucial democratic moment, with major European issues high on the agenda such as the European Green Deal, the rise of extremism and populism, the rule of law, the future of economic governance amid growing inequalities and the challenges stemming from geopolitical uncertainties.

Without the right safeguards and action, these elections could provide a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, propaganda and cyber-attacks that try to influence citizens' votes and destabilise our democratic processes. The organisational challenges to combat disinformation are manifold and involve multiple actors, including civil society. The conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), during which citizens worked on recommendations, also provide legitimate grounds for the EESC to take an active role as key partner in the run-up to these elections.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- *Ensure a robust participation of our Committee, together with civil society, in inter-institutional activities and campaigns to **increase voter participation ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections.***
- *Support civil society organisations in their fight to defend democracy, to combat disinformation and covert foreign influence by supporting and taking steps to implement the Commission Defence of Democracy package ahead of the European elections.*
- *Back the European Commission in supervising very large online platforms to mitigate systemic risks for democratic and electoral processes.*

## Promote fundamental values and the rule of law

Civil society representatives at national level are calling for robust actions from the EU on fundamental values and the rule of law. They want the EU to support the role of civil society as democratic watchdog, and encourage authorities to act in order to raise their standards on high-quality frameworks for civic space, funding, freedom of expression, media freedom, abusive litigation against journalists and rights' defenders and non-discrimination.

Throughout the new mandate, I will consistently promote democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law as guiding principles for all activities. This concerns the work of our Committee, our interactions with European institutions and civil society, our international relations, but also all our political initiatives, events, and publications. Shrinking space for civil society means shrinking democracy and we cannot let that happen.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- *Support a **renewed and strong mandate for our "EESC Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law"**, with a view to raising public awareness about the crucial work done by the Group and to strengthen the role of watchdog played by civil society.*
- *Promote an **"EESC Civil Society Health Test"** to actively monitor developments affecting civil society in EU Member States and candidate countries.*

# STAND UP FOR DEMOCRACY

## *Abroad*

### The Civil Society Gateway to democracy and prosperity

The future of the European Union is deeply intertwined with the stability and prosperity of our neighbours in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan. We will keep promoting their peace, stability and integration.

Given the ongoing pressure from Russia on Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and other countries, I will strengthen our partnerships and foster greater interconnectivity between our civil societies, which are the beating hearts of democracy.

By acting as a true Civil Society Gateway for these countries, the EESC will support and empower them to fight for freedom, democracy, and closer integration. We will provide them with the necessary support in the framework of the enlargement process to make sure they upgrade their socio-economic and democratic systems to reach EU standards based on the Single Market, the Green Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

#### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- **Personally foster high-level contacts with candidate countries** such as Western Balkan partners, Ukraine, and Moldova in the framework of the enlargement process, and promote the work of our common Civil Society Platforms.
- **For the first time involve civil society representatives from EU accession countries in the daily advisory work of the Committee** by appointing **Honorary Enlargement Members**, in particular in the drafting process of key opinions.

### Supporting EU soft diplomacy for strong and resilient civil societies

A global battle of values and narratives is taking place worldwide, with different countries and regions vying for influence. It is crucial for the EU to promote and uphold the values enshrined in the EU Treaties, at home but also abroad. The EESC will put to work its network of civil society contacts to reinforce its value-based diplomacy, encompassing areas such as climate change, culture, social and economic affairs on a global stage.

#### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- **Personally foster the cooperation with international organisations at highest level** (i.e. United Nations, International Labour Organization, World Trade Organization)
- **Promote the values that build the foundation of the EU through soft power** (cultural, energy and climate, blue diplomacy) by contributing to mapping existing actions and initiatives, strengthening dialogue and cooperation with civil society organisations in third countries in these areas and working on dedicated opinions.



# SPEAK UP FOR EUROPE

## *A more representative voice*

The EESC provides a forum for citizens and stakeholders to voice their opinions in the EU decision-making process. During the next mandate, I will build upon our achievements and strive to enlarge the scope of the EESC's representativeness by broadening our stakeholder base and by empowering new players to contribute to EU policies.

### **A new generation forum**

Today's decisions are made to build a strong and just future for the generations to come. In that context, it is imperative that young people get to voice their opinion on those decisions that will impact them now and in the future. They must be provided with a platform to raise their concerns and needs.

Therefore, during my mandate, I will seek to more actively involve young people in policy making, in a manner most suitable to them, accompanied by a thorough monitoring and assessment of EESC proposals with regard to their impact on young peoples' lives.

#### ***As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:***

- **Create a "Young EESC Ad hoc Group" on Youth Engagement** with the clear mandate of continuing the work started by the Coordination Group for the European Year of Youth.
- **Use the EESC webpage "For more youth engagement"** as a tool to showcase and promote concrete actions taken and activities organised by the EESC and by its members.
- **Immediately start implementing the EU Youth Test in EESC opinions**, working closely with the Sections and CCMI to make sure that EESC opinions reflect the perspectives of young people in all policy fields.
- **Expand the role of "EESC Youth Delegates"** in the day-to-day work of the EESC, as demonstrated by their successful participation in the EESC delegation to the United Nations Climate Change Conference.
- **Reinforce EESC youth activities** under the established EESC brand "Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS)", in particular in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in 2024.
- **Establish a Youth Advisors Council to the President** that will provide pragmatic and result-oriented recommendations, with a variety of perspectives from young activists, and will make specific proposals with a special emphasis on climate change.

## A more equal forum

Standing up for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental values starts within the walls of your own home. This is why the EESC will double down on its internal reforms to ensure greater transparency, integrity and fairness.

EESC strongly opposes any form of discrimination, including gender discrimination. Gender equality is rooted in the values upon which the EU is built and should be promoted holistically and horizontally at all levels.

Gender equality is a prerequisite for achieving a fairer and stronger Europe. The Committee has a role to play here too, which starts with the example we set as an assembly and through the decisions we take. This is why we need a strong and clear commitment to improving gender equality in our Committee.

During my mandate, I will continuously foster a life-long gender equality culture, with tailored measures for each stage of the life cycle, in all activities of the Committee. Not only should gender be mainstreamed in all EESC policy work, but female leadership should be strongly encouraged in-house.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- ***Strengthen the mandate of the Equality Group*** to ensure implementation, monitor progress and, where necessary, propose adjustment measures to ensure that goals are met.
- ***To follow up on the work of the Equality Group's survey on "Members' Inclusion, Work distribution and Well-being"*** and, where appropriate, to propose measures that will improve gender balance at the EESC.
- ***Foster a strategic collaboration with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council*** to mainstream gender equality in all relevant EU policies.
- ***Organise round tables to mainstream gender equality in all EESC policy work and activities.***
- ***Advocate structural solutions to increase the share of female representation in all instances of the Committee*** and carefully monitor progress through regular reports.
- ***Boost the transparency of the work of the EESC***, ensure structural involvement in the EU transparency register and support EU ethics body.



# SPEAK UP FOR EUROPE

## *A strong and meaningful voice*

### An institution heard outside its walls

With the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, the EESC will strengthen its mission as consultative body for the EU institutions and as a more representative channel for stakeholders and citizens. In this context, EESC work and priorities must be communicated to the external world in a clear way. A thorough institutional reform will aim at making the voice of the EESC stronger and better heard. During the mandate, I will support a new approach to the Committee's work in order to allow for a consistent outreach to EU institutions and stakeholders: clearer messages will be delivered via an updated format of opinions, allowing for direct identification of important conclusions and recommendations.

#### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- *Promote a compelling and effective social media presence and a **major revamp of the EESC website** in order to better promote our activities, events and documents.*
- *Ensure an active promotion and enhanced follow up of the **EESC recommendations** to institutions and stakeholders through strong collaboration at all levels.*
- *Implement the new format of opinions to allow for a clear identification of civil society recommendations.*
- *Open the IT tool NaviGate to publicise the work of the EESC and its opinions at different stages to all stakeholders.*

## An evidence-based and forward-looking institution

As the house of European organised civil society, the EESC is the best place to raise and anticipate the concerns, problems or challenges of citizens. Therefore, an evidence-based and forward-looking approach to the work of the Committee is necessary in order to best contribute to the political agenda of the EU institutions. The EESC could thus play an important role as horizon scanner of the various transformation processes of our time.

Adapting to changing times will require making the most of the EESC consultative mandate established in the Treaty, by proactively identifying and interpreting megatrends, finding gaps in legislation and developing proposals for comprehensive action plans and systematically embedding the foresight dimension in our discussions. Developing a forward-looking perspective of the EESC work would also allow for a better positioning in the decision-making process and to propose new priorities for the forthcoming Commission.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- **Strengthen the EESC's relations with think tanks** by involving them in the preparation of selected opinions.
- **Revise methodology of opinions and use exploratory and own-initiative opinions** to diagnose long-term challenges appropriately.
- **Call for an annual EESC Summit of Think Tanks.**
- **Systematically implement a foresight analysis in our opinions.**
- **Capitalise on and promote the work done under the "Call for an EU Blue Deal"** as priority for the new Commission priorities and a potential EU Citizens Initiative.

Since the Treaties of Rome, and the foundation of our Committee, the role and powers of the EESC has grown in importance. Looking ahead, and following the Conference on the Future of Europe, a new Convention to revise our founding treaties has never been closer. I want the EESC to be prepared to fully play its role in this upcoming process.

### *As the newly elected President of the EESC, I will:*

- **Launch a thorough analysis** of the involvement of the EESC and civil society in past Treaty negotiations and explore its potential future role by **creating a set of best practices and developing an actionable proposal for an enhanced role of the EESC** in order to give it greater prominence and increase its influence and visibility, including **specific recommendations for Treaty amendments where they are necessary.**

# EESC PRESIDENT OLIVER RÖPKE

## *Moving forward the EU's social agenda and safeguarding sustainable competitiveness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

This Presidency takes office at a time marked by the social, geopolitical and economic repercussions of a multi-faceted crisis: the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; Russia's continued military aggression against Ukraine and neighbouring countries, threatening values of democracy and freedom; the cost of living crisis and the recent global banking instability. At the same time, the EU, together with its international partners, committed to climate goals that need urgent and sustained actions to avoid a collective failure we cannot afford: the twin green and digital transitions are yet to be achieved. The multiple crises risk impeding the resilience of the EU, exacerbating social and economic inequalities and leading to the rise of populism and self-centred nationalism.

Now more than ever, the European Union must take strategic decisions to achieve objectives set in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the EU Green Deal, with the aim of strengthening European resilience and achieving open strategic autonomy in an international rules-based world.

The future of Europe, and more particularly the role of the European Union as a project of peace, shared values and well-being for its citizens, is at stake. Organised civil society has a crucial role to play in advancing the top priorities of today. Reinforcing the resilience of the EU requires the simultaneous promotion of the social, economic and environmental sustainability of EU policies.

The EESC pursues a programme of political priorities aimed at creating a more resilient EU by fast-forwarding the implementation of the Green and Social Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals to manage the twin transition.

### **Moving forward the EU's social agenda**

The multiple crises facing the EU have brought the need to protect citizens' well-being and to push for social inclusion to light. In addition, the transformation of our societies brought about by the twin green and digital transition affects the way Europeans live, consume and work.

30 years after establishing the Single Market, the EESC must focus its efforts on social and economic upward convergence that leaves no one behind. A just and people-centred approach will secure social rights, ensure decent labour market conditions and fight poverty and social exclusion. In this context, the EESC must support the implementation of a Green and Social Deal; the Sustainable Development Goals; and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Given the significant impact of the twin green and digital transition on jobs and employment, the EESC must support workers' protection and sustainable labour conditions with a view to ensuring social convergence and a level-playing field among all workers. Therefore, the EESC must continue its activities to support: the promotion of collective bargaining, social dialogue and workers' involvement including democracy at work; upward convergence in wages and working conditions across Europe; the fight against precarious work; stronger EU action to eliminate the gender pay gap; and the protection of jobs and income through measures that will address the social dimension of the cost-of-living-crisis.

To ensure a fair and just transition, the development of workers' skills and competences in order to create new opportunities and to adapt to the digital age are crucial components, especially in the context of the European Year of Skills. As the twin transition will also affect labour conditions, it is imperative to improve the protection of workers' fundamental rights and work rights, and to manage technological and other workplace changes with the involvement of social partners.

Protecting workers also means protecting the more vulnerable workers who experience social inequalities. Addressing all discriminations in the labour market must remain a priority, to ensure equal treatment and equal opportunities. Special attention should be given to developing structural measures in order to ensure gender equality in the workplace.

As a consequence of the multiple crises, inflation and rising energy prices affect everyone, especially vulnerable citizens, the agricultural sector and rural areas. Poverty levels and homelessness are increasing. In this context, the EESC must work to ensure clean and affordable energy for all, with equal access to energy as a fundamental right. Measures to fight energy poverty and to empower consumers in the energy transition must be at the core of the EESC's political priorities in the field of energy. The EESC must also address the issue of homelessness and should support sustainable and inclusive housing policies.

Finally, the changes brought about in recent years by the different crises have led to mounting pressure on citizens, sometimes affecting their mental well-being. With mental health issues on the rise in the EU, the EESC must support a comprehensive approach to address these issues, and propose concrete measures to improve them.

## **Safeguarding sustainable competitiveness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The EU's economy is focusing on tackling inflation and protecting financial stability, while safeguarding economic growth and social cohesion. The climate neutral objective set for 2050 is forcing the EU industry to rapidly adapt to net-zero technologies, and is accelerating the demand for critical raw materials. Similarly, digitalisation is bringing in new technologies with the potential to change the way we work. In combination with an ongoing process of regionalisation of trade, these developments have an impact on the competitiveness of EU industry and the internal market.

A long-term strategy is needed to protect the European model of economic growth, based on sustainable competitiveness, open strategic autonomy and fair competition. A key building block in this endeavour will be the Single Market. On its 30th anniversary, the Single Market still remains incomplete. The EESC will call for further efforts in providing EU businesses of all sizes (including SMEs) with a favourable environment to innovate, invest and grow. The EESC will support a robust Single Market as a source of prosperity for EU businesses and the well-being of EU citizens. Similarly, we need to make sure that our industry is fit for the twin digital and green transition in order to achieve the objective of a climate neutral continent by 2050. Recent geopolitical developments in the wake of Russia's continued war of aggression against Ukraine, have clearly shown that we need to reduce our strategic dependencies, particularly on critical raw materials, energy and food supply, while remaining competitive on a global scale. The EESC is convinced that a resilient EU industrial policy needs to build on clean technologies and circular solutions, a human-centred and inclusive approach to digitalisation, as well as on a sustainable approach to energy security and open strategic autonomy in international trade.

Finally, the review of the economic governance framework is crucial for creating a more resilient and sustainable EU economy. A simpler, more transparent, and effective framework with greater national ownership and better enforcement will help build the green, digital and resilient economy of the future, fostering inclusive growth while ensuring the sustainability of public finances in all Member States. This, combined with a strengthened Banking and Capital Markets Union, will contribute to greater financial stability in the Euro Area. The EESC will continue to feed into the European Semester cycle and will support the completion of the Capital Markets Union and the Banking Union as key milestones to ensure a sustainable and inclusive recovery.

The EESC is convinced that the EU will remain a source of prosperity and will provide input on how these challenges can be addressed, while at the same time promoting social dialogue, fair wages and collective bargaining systems as crucial building blocks of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Social Model.

## SELECTED POLICY PRIORITIES BASED UPON INPUT FROM THE SECRETARIAT

### Accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The multiple and interlinked global crises we are facing are putting the very viability of achieving the SDGs by 2030 at significant risk. Yet the SDGs remain our lighthouse and our compass as the only universal vision for peace, socio-economic prosperity and environmental sustainability we have. Failure to implement the SDG principles of social inclusion, clean energy, universal access to public services and responsible consumption and production will lead to even more crises and geopolitical rivalries.

The EESC has a key role to play in advancing the implementation of the SDGs, as demonstrated by the recent contribution to the EU Voluntary Review to be presented at the High-Level Political Forum in New York in the summer of 2023.

A number of specific issues will deserve the special attention of the EESC: the need for an EU comprehensive strategy on the SDGs to ensure policy coherence; the need for the more structured engagement of civil society in the process where the EESC could provide a convening space for civil society to engage with policy-makers; and the focus on the social dimension of sustainability, as the transformation will only be successful if it is based on broad support, just transition and active participation by all parts of society.

### Youth engagement in climate and sustainability

The intergenerational aspect of climate and sustainable development policies and implementation mechanisms needs to be reflected in strong meaningful youth engagement at all stages of EU decision-making processes, from the drafting of legislative proposals and initiatives through to implementation, monitoring and follow-up. Implementation of the SDGs through the European Green Deal requires a new approach to a more inclusive multi-stakeholder governance model that would put young people at the heart of the engagement process and go way beyond ad hoc meetings and mere calls for consultation.

The EESC will pursue its efforts to include youth voices in its work, as well as call on the other institutions to engage young people more structurally and meaningfully. In particular, the EESC will: continue to organise the Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables and to include a youth delegate in the EESC delegation to UNFCCC COP meetings; apply the EU Youth Test to develop a consistent approach on youth engagement within the EESC and explore other far-reaching ideas to engage young people, delivering on the implementation of the EESC resolution “The long-lasting legacy of the European Year of Youth: youth mainstreaming and empowerment”.

## **Circular Economy**

The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) is a great success story of how to foster the circular economy in Europe and beyond. The ECESP supports businesses, civil society organisations and public authorities in accelerating the transition to a circular economy across Europe by fostering dialogue, sharing knowledge and expertise and exchanging good practices through a website.

The EESC will build on the success of the ECESP’s key outreach activities such as the EU Circular Talks for high-profile exchanges on current circular economy topics and its Annual Conference. Circular economy considerations must also be mainstreamed across other policy areas, including, for example, sustainable food systems and rural development.

## **A green transition for the European industry**

The objective of reducing EU greenhouse gas emissions by 55% before 2030 is challenging and requires a clear roadmap for a just transition over the coming decades. All industrial sectors will need to undergo profound change. A key condition for the success of the energy and climate transition is that the EU citizens embrace it, therefore access to quality jobs and to affordable products should be ensured.

The EU Blue Deal adds a new dimension to the Green Deal roadmap proposed by the Commission. The EESC, calling on the EU Institutions for this new comprehensive EU policy on water, will need to monitor its implementation throughout the next Commission’s mandate.

A number of specific issues will deserve special attention, notably: the need for an EU Blue Deal. The EESC will continue to ensure the overall coordination of the follow-up of this cross-cutting theme; the need to support the greening of industries, notably resource intensive ones, as well as the uptake of the clean technologies sector, including water-efficient technologies; and the need to participate in EU policy debates on the social aspects of the energy and climate transition, leveraging on EESC expertise to identify challenges and propose solutions for a fair deal to the EU citizens in terms of employment and affordable products, energy and services for all.

## **A comprehensive effort to digitalise European industry**

Digitalisation opens new scenarios for EU industry and for services as a whole and brings about new types of challenges, such as devising supporting instruments to ensure that EU industry, big and small, has an equal footing in the acquisition of these new technologies. It also entails a strong focus on the future of industrial jobs, not to avoid but rather to manage the change that this process will bring about in our industry and society, and to foster the just transition and a people-centred approach to these changes.

The EESC will: support the development in accordance with European standards of new technological sectors such as the metaverse, and zoom in on the impacts of AI in the different industrial sectors; continue its engagement on key and edge technologies, including topics such as robotics and drones; seek involvement in collateral activities that support overall EU industrial competitiveness, including participation in industrial alliances addressing digitalisation topics on the model of the participation in European Raw Materials Alliance (ERMA); and support a more structured engagement of civil society in the process, as the transformation will only be successful if it is based on broad support, just transition and active participation by all parts of society.



## Enhancing global competitiveness and the open strategic autonomy of EU industry

Securing the overall competitiveness of the EU industry has been a key objective of the Commission's industrial policy for several years now. In addition to the internal dimension, many issues related to the external dimension clearly have a strong impact on the EU's industrial competitiveness. The need for open strategic autonomy has become more apparent. The question of how public funds and state aid can be mobilised to support industry in a non-distortive way, and the criteria for the use and allocation of such funds, also needs to be addressed. To this end, the EESC will focus on strategic value chains.

The EESC will: work on an EU comprehensive strategy concerning Critical Raw Materials and will also pursue its participation in ERMA; support the increased open autonomy of strategic sectors such as defence, space and chips; contribute to rethinking the way companies protect themselves from data breaches, cyberattacks and digital espionage.

## Reforms for a resilient EU economy

The current economic environment poses challenges for the implementation of economic policies that simultaneously aim to reduce inflation and safeguard economic growth, employment and the sustainability of public finances in the medium and long term. The EESC will put forward recommendations that help policy-makers develop policies aimed at ensuring a sustainable and inclusive recovery and building a resilient EU economy, while tackling the green and digital transitions.

The EESC will continue to put forward biannual recommendations on the European Commission's Recommendation on the euro area economic policy and the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, in order to provide timely and up-to-date policy input to the process of economic policy coordination within the annual European Semester cycle.

The EESC will also put forward further recommendations for the review of the EU economic governance framework, as there is a need for strong budgetary and structural policy coordination, as well as effective economic and fiscal surveillance.

It will also put forward proposals for a reform of the consultation and coordination procedures within the European Semester to make processes simpler, more democratic and transparent. Through its dedicated European Semester Group, the EESC will continue its efforts to conduct broad consultations with EU organised civil society to monitor the implementation of the national plans within the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and ensure the involvement of civil society both at EU and national level.

## Completion of the Capital Markets Union and the Banking Union

EU financial markets need to be integrated and stable in order to support the European recovery and to get the EU back on track towards the transition to a climate-neutral and increasingly digital economy that is characterised by sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The recovery will crucially depend on the ability of European financial markets to ensure sufficient liquidity and better risk sharing. It is imperative to take decisive steps to develop an efficient and integrated Capital Markets Union and a fully-fledged Banking Union, encompassing all Member States and geared towards further harmonisation and the removing of cross-border obstacles, while safeguarding sound regulation and surveillance. The European Commission is expected to continue implementing the Capital Markets Union Action Plan, and the review of the current framework on banking supervision, insolvency and resolution and deposit guarantee schemes will have a remarkable importance.

In the next half mandate, the EESC will: work on key policy areas, such as the bank crisis management and deposit insurance scheme; contribute to the debate on sustainable finance; organise public hearings on these important topics; aim to increase the participation of EESC rapporteurs in the European Parliament's ECON Committee meetings and hearings; and develop a closer contact with the Permanent Representation to the EU of those countries holding the EU Presidency of the Council, to promote a more active participation of EESC members in key events, such as the EUROFI High Level Seminar and Final Forum.

## **A Multiannual Financial Framework fit to cope with the challenges of the future, including a strong cohesion policy**

The EESC has repeatedly called for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to be geared towards jobs, growth and competitiveness, and has called for a strong EU budget endowed with commensurate financial resources to achieve the Union's objectives. The EESC will continue to discuss how the EU budget could be funded to a larger extent by genuine own resources.

Cohesion policy must play a key and central role in ensuring a balanced recovery to sustained growth, fostering convergence, combating social exclusion and making sure that no one is left behind. The EESC will continue to insist that cohesion should help to advance agreed policies in relation to digitalisation and accessibility of services, reindustrialisation, SMEs and broadband services in the regions.

The EESC will: draw up an opinion on the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework; make proposals to the Commission on new own resources for the EU budget, following a request of the Commission; draw up an opinion on the future of cohesion policy after 2027; continue to make proposals for a cohesion policy that corresponds to the real needs of EU citizens and satisfies the long-term goals of convergence among EU regions; and draw up an opinion on sparsely populated areas, EU islands and mountain areas to stress that all regions of the EU need to have a balanced growth and development.

## **Economic and social recovery from the impact caused by the pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the resulting increase in energy prices and the cost of living**

The EESC has consistently advocated upward convergence and a more effective social policy at both EU and Member State levels. The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) reaffirms the shared commitment to the European Social Model.

In the ongoing green and digital transition, new forms of work, the protection of collective rights, the impact on labour conditions, fighting high unemployment, precarious work and poverty, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and inclusion and equality in all its facets and skills, will continue to be important issues that need to be addressed.

Recent developments in Artificial Intelligence have the potential to fundamentally change the need for highly skilled workers and to disrupt economic and production processes.

In the next half mandate, the EESC will focus on: the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, labour conditions, new forms of work and impact on youth and female employment, welfare systems (care and equality in all its facets, including income equality); the impact of artificial intelligence on the labour market and employment; and the implementation of youth mainstreaming/EU Youth Test.

## **Fundamental rights and the rule of law**

Fundamental rights and values and the rule of law continue to be under attack in many countries with growing populist movements and democratic backsliding.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to massively increase targeted disinformation, to replace highly skilled human workers in a large variety of functions and to be used for coercion and control.

The EESC will strongly support the implementation of the European Commission's Defence of Democracy package and focus on fundamental rights in the deployment of Artificial Intelligence.

## Migration

Migration will continue to be fuelled by conflict, climate change and economic inequality. The EESC will focus on migration management that is compliant with obligations under EU and international law and takes account of the EU's demographic development and economic needs.

## A secure and stable neighbourhood

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is not only a threat to the values that underpin the European Union, it is also the ultimate proof that the rules-based world order is challenged and that we have entered a more unstable geopolitical phase, which we will need to manage together.

Our immediate vicinity should remain our priority. The Eastern Partnership has been put under strong pressure in recent years, first by the decision of Belarus to suspend its participation and then by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. While Belarus is still under the iron fist of those who have suffocated its democracy, Ukraine is fighting for its freedom, and Moldova is continuing its European path despite constant Russian pressure.

In the next half mandate, the EESC will work towards further strengthening and promoting the work of the EU-Ukraine, EU-Moldova and EU-Georgia Civil Society Platforms, created by the Association agreements with these countries. The regular work and meetings of these platforms are instrumental in leading these countries on their road to European integration. Continuous links will also be maintained with the civil society of Armenia via the dedicated civil society platform.

The EESC will continue supporting independent civil society in and outside Belarus, which is under enormous pressure from the regime. We will also follow civil society developments in Azerbaijan and insist on a genuine civil and social dialogue.

The countries of the Western Balkans have been waiting for membership for years. Their civil society cooperates constantly with the EESC and encourages continuous improvements in their alignment with European law and values in order to finally crown their efforts to be part of the European family, also for the sake of peace and stability in the area.

Dialogue must continue with the countries of the Mediterranean, many of which are in a delicate political situation while facing enormous societal and economic challenges. The EESC Euromed Summit will continue promoting meaningful social dialogue in the region and focus on common priorities such as adaptation to climate change, security of energy supply and effective management of migration flows.

## Working with partners for fair and just societies respecting human rights

Today, we see growing inequalities on a global scale. The COVID pandemic has worsened the situation, erasing years of progress, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has diverted the attention from other critical challenges. The international community needs to resume its efforts to reduce inequalities and to confirm its adherence to the multilateral rules-based order and universal human rights. 2023 is the right momentum for this: 2023 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. 2023 is also a milestone for a mid-term review of SDGs.

The EESC will contribute to these efforts by: working together with civil society from the ACP and Latin American countries on promoting core commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including fundamental labour and gender rights; monitor how the implementation of projects under the EU Global Gateway Initiative contributes to the achievements on those objectives; reflect through dedicated opinions and activities on strengthening EU climate diplomacy, fighting disinformation and foreign influence, and on the contribution that civil society can bring to strengthening multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world.

## Promoting sustainable trade that is beneficial for all

Monitoring the negotiation, implementation and enforcement of trade agreements by civil society is key to preserving EU competitiveness and strengthening resilience in times of crisis.

The EESC will: continue providing administrative and policy support for Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) set up by the EU trade agreements; ensure that any shortcomings to environmental and labour rights are effectively addressed in the EU and in partner countries; promote sustainability of trade at EU level and in the World Trade Organization through the organisation of the 2nd Trade and Sustainable Development Civil Society Forum

## Studies and Policy Assessments: how to make the EESC consultative work more evidence-based

Permacrisis, polycrisis: new words are invented to try to describe the dramatic situation and events which deeply disrupt and impact our societies.

This has highlighted EU vulnerabilities and unpreparedness to the challenges of a world in permanent crisis and urges us to act and respond adequately. Yet, the answer cannot be the attempt to try to continually catch up and mitigate a crisis with short-term measures when it hits us. The EU needs to anticipate them before they happen, possibly trying to avoid them. To this end, we need to explore, anticipate and even try to shape the future.

The EESC, thanks to the knowledge of its members and networks, is perfectly fit to contribute to this EU process, making EU foresight a more efficient and participatory process.

To this end, the EESC needs to have a growing impact and contribution into the EU foresight activities, notably by developing its role in the EU Strategic Foresight Agenda and, more specifically, in the drafting of the annual Strategic Foresight Report which in turn feeds the State of the European Union (SOTEU) address. The EESC, by catalysing, gathering and conveying the views of stakeholders, including civil society organisations, think tanks and experts, will thus fulfil its role of civil society representative and ensure a truly EU participatory foresight.

The EESC will further develop its cooperation with the other EU institutions, both through bilateral relationships and within the ESPAS EU interinstitutional network.

To fully exploit its potential, the EESC will continue to raise awareness among our Members, and staff, of the importance of a foresight-based approach in our work, and build their capacity through regular trainings, organisation of seminars and conferences and participation in external foresight events.

EU legislation and policy-making need to be evidence-based, to better take stock and take into consideration what has worked and what has not, what needs to be changed and improved as well as what our societies, our citizens and Europe really need in order to face the huge challenges with which they are confronted.

The annual studies programme is increasingly used by EESC services to support or implement policy priorities, mainly by commissioning external experts to research topical issues of concern for organised civil society, and thus provide a growing evidence base for our legislative work.

A medium-term goal of the studies programme is to take on more forward-looking and participative assessments that could be revisited to build and expand foresight capacities.

The EESC will develop its contribution to the Better Regulation Agenda, by bringing the added value of civil society perspective in the assessment phase of the EU legislative policy cycle through ex-post evaluations, as well as to make the EESC consultative work more evidence based.

## Enhancing the competitiveness of Europe's industry and supporting the fast transition to climate neutrality

The competitiveness of European industry will remain a major topic in the coming years. Recent initiatives to support national industries in different parts of the world have raised many concerns in the EU. The EU must respond to, but at the same time safeguard the integrity of its Single Market. However, the competitiveness of industry cannot be seen today without its green aspect. Therefore, the EU's objective is no longer only to maintain a competitive industrial base, but also to finance a transition towards a sustainable industry, to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, to decarbonise Europe's industry and guarantee access to affordable fossil-free energy.

In addition, it is also crucial to consider the interests of workers in this equation. The transition to a low-carbon economy will likely have significant impacts on jobs and employment opportunities, particularly in industries that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels. At the same time, it can also be seen as an opportunity to create jobs in new industrial ecosystems and focus on specific competences to be created at Member State and regional levels.

The EESC will continue its work on the Green Deal Industrial Plan. The EESC will provide a comprehensive response to the different aspects of the Commission initiative, which will require political attention and action. Adequate follow-up has to be assured with the European Commission, rotating presidencies of the Council and other institutions.

The EESC will also have to address the increasing demand for a skilled workforce and knowledgeable staff in public administrations that are charged with the task of assessing the various industrial projects.

Focus will also be given to the implementation of EU policies and strategies, defining better tools to gauge their impact on the economy, but also on society.

## Supporting entrepreneurship in all its forms: SMEs and social economy enterprises

Entrepreneurship in all its forms and in all sectors of activity (including tourism, industry, platform economy, social economy) is essential to ensure economic growth, innovation, employment and social inclusion. It is key to support the green and digital transition of SMEs and to identify the obstacles that they are still facing when accessing the Single Market.

SMEs will also play a significant role in the Green Deal Industrial Plan, as they represent the vast majority of businesses in the EU and have the potential to drive innovation and promote sustainability.

The EESC continues to play an important role at interinstitutional level in promoting social entrepreneurship and the social economy, and in monitoring the impact of developments in this sector on traditional SMEs. Since the adoption of the Action Plan for the social economy, social economy enterprises became even more relevant in achieving a resilient economy and a just transition.

The EESC will: accompany the sustainable transformation of SMEs through the gathering of and communication on best practices; explore the role of and support for SMEs in the Green Deal Industrial Plan; strengthen SMEs' financial resilience and contribute to the upcoming Relief package for SMEs (late payment directive); support the implementation of the Action Plan for the social economy by cooperating closely with the rotating Council presidencies; and contribute to the Commission's proposal on a Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions.

## **Empowering consumers for the green and digital transition**

Achieving the Green Deal objectives requires the contribution of every single European. More and more consumers are becoming aware that they can make a difference by adapting their consumption patterns. Although consumers want to contribute to the green transition, there are obstacles along the way.

The EU needs to strengthen consumer rights and contribute to a circular, clean and green EU economy. Consumers must be enabled to take informed purchasing decisions and therefore contribute to more sustainable consumption.

The EESC will continue to build on its fruitful working relationship with the European Commission and the European Parliament on consumer issues. The organisation of its flagship annual Consumer Day remains a priority. This event will continue to provide consumers with a voice each year to shed light on current debates.

The EESC will also take part in the follow-up process for the Blue Deal opinions and consider incorporating this topic into the sustainable consumption framework.

## **Beyond the energy crisis: achieving a sustainable, fair and strategic energy security**

The energy crises that started in 2021, and aggravated by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, has imposed a quick reaction to energy policies at EU and Member State levels. In the last year, new legislation has been issued concerning gas storage, promoting renewable energy sources, electricity prices, alternative sources for energy supplies, new energy infrastructures and exceptional taxation measures.

A number of specific policies, linked to the current crisis, will deserve continued attention, focused on the key role of civil society organisations in promoting social, labour and civil interests, fairness to economic actors and preservation of the shared goal of a green and socially just transition: tackling energy poverty; skilling and re-skilling labour forces; adopting new forms of energy production and consumption, especially through local energy communities; and introducing a reform of the electricity markets that preserves the economic level playing field in the EU internal market.

## **The contribution of housing policies to economic, social and territorial cohesion**

Housing is more and more pointed at by different actors as a key driver in any policy aimed at achieving social cohesion and shared welfare. Addressing housing policies in the Member States will be pivotal to achieving a real contribution in a number of areas.

Under the new EESC Presidency, the following priorities will be addressed: price affordability to combat inflation; effective isolation to contribute to energy efficiency; access to housing for vulnerable people to achieve social cohesion; tilting towards sustainable building materials to contribute to the green transition; sustainable urban development to facilitate proper urban transport, achieve territorial cohesion and combat inequalities.



## **Greening the transport: addressing the needs of users, citizens and civil society organisations**

Speeding up the transformation and greening of all transport means will be a key component of the green transition. Here again, the voices of transport workers, consumers, companies and civil society organisations need to be relayed.

In the upcoming mid-term, the EESC will pay attention to the development of legislative proposals aimed at: emission reduction; digitalisation; alternative means of transport in urban mobility; decarbonisation of passenger and freight transport in ground, air and maritime transport (including even professional transport means, such as fishing vessels); and a common European mobility data space.



**European Economic  
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