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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

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 21st 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 21st 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.



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