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# Civil Society Organisations' Bulletin



**BELGIAN PRESIDENCY  
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU**  
*a look ahead*

# FOREWORD

## Hopes for 2024

**Séamus BOLAND (IE)**

*President, Civil Society Organisations' Group*



Séamus Boland © EESC

And so we begin the new year of 2024, hoping for something better than 2023, especially in a time when bellicosity seems to be strengthening rather than diminishing. 2024 also heralds the start of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European

Union<sup>1</sup>. The **six priorities** outlined by the Belgian government that will underpin their presidential intentions are: Defending the rule of law, democracy and unity; Strengthening our competitiveness; Pursuing a green and just transition; Re-enforcing our social and health agenda; Protecting people and borders; and Promoting a global Europe.

From the **perspective of the Civil Society Organisations' Group** of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), it is welcome to read that the Belgian Presidency will focus on greater inclusion of citizens in the EU; an inclusion that centres around respecting fundamental rights in an atmosphere of equality, non-discrimination and citizens' wellbeing. In a world where many citizens are being attracted by the extremes of political thoughts, this is extremely necessary. This is also one of the reasons why the Civil Society Organisations' Group will continue to strongly support **greater inclusion of civil society organisations** in the making and implementing of policy in 2024. In regard to democratic participation, it is also worth remembering the following quote from Jacques Delors, who sadly passed away on 27 December 2023:

**'This weakening is worsened by the widening distance between the governed and their governments.'**

What is not specifically mentioned in the priorities of the Belgian Presidency are the **ongoing wars** in the EU's vicinity, which will affect its daily business. In the **Middle East**, the brutality meted out by all sides, especially towards children, breaks all known rules of war and begs the anguished question: Why have we lost all sense of humanity? The great hope of a peaceful world that arose from the Second World War cry 'never again' seems a distant historical idea that is no longer part of modern thinking. Of course, the Middle East has, for now, put the illegal Russian invasion of **Ukraine** on the back seat.

The EU has strongly supported Ukraine's right to protect its sovereignty and is now engaged in a process of fast-forwarding the EU's enlargement. During my recent visit to Ukraine, I learned about the fears of Ukrainian civil society organisations of losing out on the many freedoms gained as an independent nation. For this reason also, this war needs to stop.

In relation to EU enlargement, I am glad to announce that on 4 January, the EESC launched a call for expression of interest<sup>2</sup> to civil society representatives from the EU candidate countries to become **Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM)** and contribute to the Committee's advisory work<sup>3</sup>. With this new initiative, the Committee will gradually involve civil society representatives from the candidate countries in its daily work, promoting civil society's role in the enlargement process before accession.

Meanwhile, 2024 in the EU is the year of **elections to the European Parliament**<sup>4</sup>. The power currently enjoyed by the Parliament should not be underestimated. Therefore, the idea that voters will not take these elections seriously is extremely dangerous. Our vote for Members of the European Parliament will determine the co-legislator of the European Union. More importantly, it will determine how European citizens are represented in the following five years. Let's not forget that climate change and environmental protection are still major issues, not to mention the fact that we still need to focus on legislation on health, education and fundamental rights, including the fight against poverty.

I attended the **European Congress of Young Farmers**<sup>5</sup> on 6 December 2023. As in all youth organisations, it is sobering to realise that they are advocating for a time when we have succeeded in achieving our goals on climate change and farming. They demand a dramatic increase in resources aimed at using research to inform on best farming practices in a new world. As a former member of the Irish Young Farmers, I was reminded of how things have not changed, like the debate on reducing the average age of farmers. Currently it is 51.4 years, not much lower than when I was involved.

Finally, I would like to wish all Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group and readers of our bulletin all the best for 2024. This year our motto will continue to be: Let's make a difference.

Séamus Boland

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1 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

2 The civil society organisations from EU candidate countries, who fulfil the eligibility criteria, can submit their applications until 25 January at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Call\\_for\\_expressions\\_of\\_interest\\_EESC\\_ECMS\\_2023](https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Call_for_expressions_of_interest_EESC_ECMS_2023)

3 EESC, press release, <https://europa.eu/!cdvQyB>

4 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>

5 European Congress of Young Farmers, <https://euyoungfarmers.eu/>

# BELGIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU: A LOOK AHEAD

## Charting a vision: The Belgian Presidency's blueprint for the future European social agenda



**Alain COEUR (BE)**  
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Alain Coeur © EESC

Seen through the lens of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, the [Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#)<sup>1</sup> will focus on some very social issues, which we hope will be able to influence the next legislature in both the European Parliament and the European Commission. As well as the ongoing **legislative work**, such as that related to the [platform work directive](#)<sup>2</sup>, the regulation on the [coordination of social security systems](#)<sup>3</sup>, and the introduction of a [European disability card](#)<sup>4</sup>, there will also be legislative work on **economic governance and social imbalances**.

A joint EPSCO<sup>5</sup>-ECOFIN<sup>6</sup> Council meeting (to be held in Brussels in March 2024) will look in particular at the issue of **social investment**

and ensuring that it is properly taken into account in the revision of the economic governance framework.

On 20 March 2024, a [tripartite social summit](#)<sup>7</sup> jointly organised with the European Commission will be held at Val Duchesse, almost 40 years after Jacques Delors convened the meeting that gave rise to European social dialogue. The summit will aim to discuss the challenges facing our labour markets, workers and businesses, in particular: **skills shortages, labour shortages and artificial intelligence**.

A [high-level conference](#)<sup>8</sup> on the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)<sup>9</sup> taking place in La Hulpe on 15-16 April should culminate in a "**La Hulpe Interinstitutional Declaration**". The presidency's programme also includes a conference on [The Social Economy at the Core of Transitions](#)<sup>10</sup> to be held on 12-13 February, which will be coupled with a meeting of ministers responsible for the social economy that

should lead to a **roadmap for the future** of the social economy.

On the occasion of the Belgian Presidency, the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group will host a conference addressing the state of health in Europe on 4-5 June in Liège.

By taking this action, the Belgian Presidency and the EESC would like to be able to provide an outline for the European social agenda of the future.



© EU

- 1 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>
- 2 Consilium, Rights for platform workers: Council and Parliament strike deal, <https://europa.eu/!jxGg6y>
- 3 European Commission, EU social security coordination, <https://europa.eu/!gQ34pX>
- 4 Consilium, European Disability Card, <https://europa.eu/!Cj8ByX>
- 5 Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
- 6 Economic and Financial Affairs Council
- 7 Consilium, Tripartite Social Summit, <https://europa.eu/!rF6xwx>
- 8 Belgian Presidency, conference, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/high-level-conference-on-the-european-pillar-of-social-rights/>
- 9 European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://europa.eu/!MC96Vn>
- 10 Conference, The Social Economy at the Core of Transitions, <https://socialeconomy2024.eu/en/>

## Competitiveness should be the guiding principle of the Belgian Presidency



**Luc HENDRICKX (BE)**  
Former Director,  
SMEunited

Luc Hendrickx

As the [Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#)<sup>1</sup> will be the bridge to the next legislative term, it has a decisive role to play in the direction the EU takes in the coming years in the field of **SME policy**<sup>2</sup>.

The current term saw the introduction of an avalanche of **new rules**, in particular for the

**digital and green transition**. Now that this framework is in place, it has to be ensured that the 2024-2029 term and Strategic Agenda focus on the **correct implementation** of these new rules, while supporting SMEs to adapt their business processes and business models.

This should certainly be taken into account at the La Hulpe Summit, which should build on social dialogue - the underpinning driver for developing well-balanced solutions. It is crucial to fully involve the social partners in labour and social protection policies at all levels, while respecting their autonomy and the subsidiarity principle.

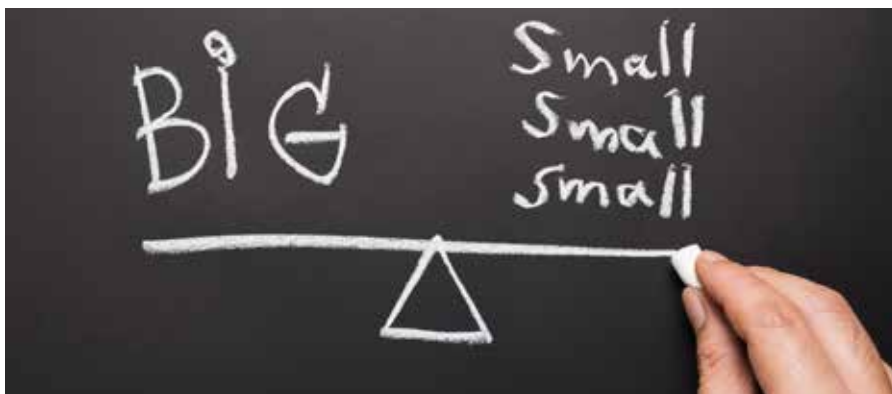
**Competitiveness** should always be the cross-cutting theme woven through social and climate policy. It has to be supported by an **SME test** for every proposal and all policy options based on the [Think Small First](#)<sup>3</sup> and [Once Only](#)<sup>4</sup> principles, and genuine action must be taken in response to the results.

We expect the Belgian Presidency to deliver an **action plan** with specific steps and proposals in order to achieve rapidly the promised 25% reduction in **reporting requirements**. This should include **recognition** of the **Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for SMEs** as a safe harbour, shield and information limit.

- 1 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>
- 2 Policy for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
- 3 European Commission, Think Small First Principle, <https://europa.eu/!cbqNyy>
- 4 European Commission, The Once Only Principle System, <https://europa.eu/!byydBN>

The Belgian Presidency should ensure that the EU delivers a **well-functioning Single Market** without unnecessary internal barriers, by focusing more closely on enforcement of existing rules before creating new ones.

It is equally important to enforce respect for competition rules and measures on global dominant operators to guarantee a **level playing field for SMEs** operating in unbalanced business contexts. In this respect, the presidency should enable the [late payment proposal](#)<sup>1</sup> to be adopted swiftly.



1 European Commission, proposal for a regulation on combating late payment in commercial transactions, <https://europa.eu/!mFp6Hf>

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## Placing the survival of family farming back at the heart of European policy



Marianne Streeel © FWA

**Marianne STREEEL**  
President, Walloon Federation of Agriculture (FWA)<sup>1</sup>

The months ahead will be particularly crucial for the maintenance and survival of our **family farming** model. The issues facing the [Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#)<sup>2</sup> will obviously include the matter of **controlling the environmental impact of agricultural activities** even more effectively, through the necessary reduction of either pesticides or greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the most important issue will

first and foremost be to ensure our **food self-sufficiency**. Recent geopolitical events have shown us that the comfort on which our society has relied until today is entirely relative and could be shattered if we do not make the right choices and reflect horizontally, with thorough impact assessment research, before taking decisions.

All over Europe, the farming world is suffering and struggling to find **youngsters willing to take over businesses**. Our wish for this presidency is to reflect on this issue, which must be incorporated into the overall **strategy for agriculture**. This strategy should also include sufficient **incentives** for the development of agricultural research and innovation. Both can help with the implementation and achievement of our



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strategic sustainability objectives - so that Walloon agriculture grows a little more sustainable every day.

1 Walloon Federation of Agriculture (FWA - Fédération Wallonne de L'Agriculture) is the main professional association for the agricultural sector in Wallonia, one of the regions of Belgium, <https://www.fwa.be/>

2 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

## Moving forward with courage and strength



Christian Moos © EESC

**Christian MOOS (DE)**  
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Secretary-General, Europa-Union Germany  
Representative, German National Network for Civil Society  
Board Member, European Movement Germany (EBD)

Much is at stake during the [Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#)<sup>1</sup>. Individual Member States are disregarding **Europe's values** with increasing assertiveness. Dictators are threatening Europe's freedom from inside and out. Where decisive action is needed, individual EU governments are abusing the existing rules to hold the community ransom or, even worse, to please Russia. **So Europe can no longer afford to have players wielding their veto**. Clearer still is that the wheat must be separated from the chaff. **Enhanced cooperation between liberal European democracies is the order of the day**.

In November 2023, the European Parliament adopted [proposals for landmark reform](#)<sup>2</sup> of the European Union. MEPs have therefore taken onboard the recommendations of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>3</sup>, in which the EESC played an active role. At the same time, **populists and extremists**, especially from the far right, are stirring up **anti-European sentiment**. "This EU must die", says a leading German right-winger, whose party hopes to do well in the [European elections](#)<sup>4</sup>. These attempts to intimidate must be firmly resisted.

No, the EU must live, and live it will. Those who want to respect Europe's values and promote

1 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

2 European Parliament, press release, <https://europa.eu/!hbTJJM>

3 European Commission, Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://europa.eu/!CNwFyK>

4 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>

Europe's unity in diversity will **stand up to negative forces**. They will not be a rabbit caught in the headlights. They continue to represent the majority in Europe and will draw on this strength. Those who stand for authoritarianism, chauvinism and nationalism must be isolated and, if necessary, left behind.

The pro-European parties have strong allies in European civil society. The European social partners are unequivocally committed to Europe. Alongside organised civil society, they defend liberal democracy and the idea of European sovereignty. The latter is based on a capacity to act and solidarity.

With civil society engagement and participatory democracy, **European democracy can withstand infiltration** by reactionary forces **and the threat** posed by aggressive third countries. European democracy must be able

to defend itself and will prove it can do so. It is therefore **high time for a European dialogue of organised civil society**, providing an

effective bulwark against the enemies of democracy.



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## The green transition hinges on the East



**Corina MURAFĂ (RO)**  
Co-Founder, Romanian Energy Poverty Observatory  
Lecturer, Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Corina Murafa

In our Union, the **success of the green transition**<sup>1</sup> will be predicated on the **willingness of the most vulnerable to embrace this vision**. We are talking here not only about vulnerable citizens or regions, but also Member States with less developed democracies, education systems, and social and civic dialogue frameworks. Yes, you guessed it.

The green energy transition package<sup>2</sup> must deliver on its promises first and foremost in Central and Eastern Europe, and the [Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](https://europa.eu/!DnPbgQ)<sup>3</sup> must help achieve this.

I work on energy and climate, with a focus on energy poverty and the just transition process, in Romania, my home country. Pretty much like our neighbours, we have been notorious at mismanaging transitions in the past. Yes, we have achieved economic growth over the past decades, but we have also **widened inequalities**. Yes, we have achieved low emissions per capita, but we have also **destroyed whole segments of our economies**, leaving regions and people behind. Yes, we have become EU Member States, but our workers and brains have fled the country.

What is being asked of us by the green energy transition process is nothing short of a **complete overhaul of the way we consume, produce and travel**. Some EU Member States are already reaping the benefits of the green transition process, because their industrial value chains have quickly adapted to the low-carbon growth paradigm, because their academic environment was robust enough to develop new frameworks for

learning and qualifications and because their public institutions had a greater capacity for stakeholder engagement and long-term policy planning.

We see marches for the climate in Brussels and Berlin, but not in Bucharest and Sofia. The green transition is as much about **revamping regulation**, as it is about **winning the hearts and minds** of the people. The European institutions must both stand in **solidarity with the younger Member States**, and be **firm in sanctioning** any divergence from the shared vision of achieving carbon neutrality no later than 2050.



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1 European Commission, The European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>  
2 European Commission, Energy and the Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!DnPbgQ>  
3 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

**Belgium holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2024, from 1 January to 30 June. Here are the six priorities of the Belgian Presidency for this semester :**



- Defending rule of law, democracy, and unity
- Strengthening our competitiveness
- Pursuing a green and just transition
- Reinforcing our social and health agenda
- Protecting people and borders
- Promoting a global Europe

For more information visit the website of the Belgian Presidency at: <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

# How Belgium can drive the debate on Europe's green future



**Danny JACOBS**  
Director, Union for a Better Environment<sup>1</sup>

Danny Jacobs © Bond Beter Leefmilieu



**Benjamin CLARYSSE**  
Policy Coordinator, Union for a Better Environment

Benjamin Clarysse © Bond Beter Leefmilieu

On 1 January Belgium took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. For six months our country will be able to take a leading role in European debates. But can it also shake its reputation for lagging behind on **climate and the environment** and become a proactive European leader?

Belgium has often remained on the sidelines in recent years, abstaining in European Council votes. The **Social Climate Fund**<sup>2</sup>, the **Nature Restoration Law**<sup>3</sup> and the **renewed authorisation of glyphosate**<sup>4</sup> are just a few examples of issues on which Belgium has remained passive. However, we could see Belgium become more visible in the first half of 2024.

The Belgian Presidency<sup>5</sup> comes at a busy time. The European **legislative term ends** in October 2024. Many files from the **Fit for 55 package**<sup>6</sup> still need to be finalised in these last stages and it is **up to our government to reach strong agreements** under this time pressure. With the spotlight on our federal government, we hope that they will put their best foot forward and that Flanders does not throw a spanner in the works. One of the most prominent matters at the top of the list is

the **implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability**<sup>7</sup>, which includes microplastics and PFAS pollution<sup>8</sup>. In this case Flanders and the federal government seem to be on the same page.

Perhaps what is even more important is the role Belgium has in guiding the **next European Commission agenda** and raising the bar: What comes after the **European Green Deal**<sup>9</sup>? With war at our borders, high energy prices, fierce competition with China and the US, EU enlargement to new Member States on the cards and with migration as a political 'hot potato', the EU is under great pressure on all fronts. **Geopolitical developments will determine the direction** we will take over the next five years, and the **climate and environment agenda must not be watered down** as a result of all these additional challenges. Preparing the stage for the next European legislative term therefore calls not only for diplomatic skills but also for robust political efforts.

For example, Belgium should launch discussions on the **European climate objectives for 2040** and facilitate the debate on the **critical role of nature, ecosystems and nature-based solutions**. Our country should also establish the outline of a **European circular economy**<sup>10</sup>. Finally, the **just transition** is also on our wish list: how do we make the transition towards climate neutrality without leaving anyone behind?

Hopefully our country will take up the challenge and put its best foot forward as of 1 January.



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1 Union for a Better Environment (Bond Beter Leefmilieu) unites nature and environmental organisations and strengthens the voice of sustainable frontrunners in Flanders, one of the regions of Belgium, <https://www.bondbeterleefmilieu.be/>  
2 European Commission, Social Climate Fund, <https://europa.eu/!QQFWvh>  
3 European Commission, Nature Restoration Law, <https://europa.eu/!qFDVgf>  
4 European Commission, Food Safety, Glyphosate, <https://europa.eu/!4rhWN6>  
5 Belgian Presidency, <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>  
6 European Commission, Fit for 55 package, <https://europa.eu/!DWckrW>  
7 European Commission, chemical strategy, <https://europa.eu/!RhRBdq>  
8 PFAS: Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances  
9 European Commission, The European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!8bB4bR>  
10 European Commission, circular economy, <https://europa.eu/!fQtgij>

# COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

## New consumption environments challenge us all – European Consumer Day 2023 emphasises need for effective enforcement and protection of children in digital world



Tiina Vyyryläinen

**Tiina VYYRYLÄINEN**  
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Head of Policy Team,  
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The EESC's last [Consumer Day](#)<sup>1</sup> took place on 11 December 2023. The theme of the event was twofold, looking at the **effective implementation of legislation** on the one hand and the **protection of children and adolescents** on the other. The main focuses of these topics were the specific challenges and new dimensions of digitalisation and of working in a digital environment.

The day consisted of two very interesting and topical panel discussions, as well as speeches and practical examples. Participants were able to hear a wide range of stakeholder views on the topics. The European Commission was heavily involved and many of the participants at the awards ceremony of the [EU Product Safety Award](#)<sup>2</sup> that morning were in attendance. The event was moderated by **Filip Van den Abele**.

The **first panel** discussion was led by **Professor Catalina Goanta** of the University of Utrecht. She carefully described the current state of academic debate and research and the challenges connected with the specificities of the digital world and the **effective implementation of legislation**. New technologies and the way the digital world works are challenges for all of us, including researchers. The role of social media actors in marketing, for example, is an extremely interesting area of research, e.g. from the point

of view of the impact on consumer behaviour of hidden marketing by influencers.

There was a strong consensus among participants in the first panel discussion that there is still **much room for improvement** in the effective implementation of legislation and existing requirements. While a bold interpretation of existing legislation can address many of the challenges posed by the digital environment, **new regulation is also needed to ensure that consumers are protected in the digital world**. However, the **provisions on paper are not enough**: the supervisory authorities and the European Commission must have the necessary skills and resources to tackle problems and eradicate abuses. At the end of the panel discussion, participants heard about a tool developed by the Commission to **facilitate market surveillance**. It is hoped that the tool will be widely adopted by national authorities responsible for consumer safety and market surveillance. The tool is a very good illustration of how technological progress can best serve the interests of consumers.

The rest of the day focused on the specific **position of children and young people as consumers in the digital environment**. Children are involved in the digital world at an increasingly young age, as consumers, data subjects and sometimes even content creators. The panel discussed the impact of the digital environment on **children's well-being and mental health, children's rights, and access to information** in an understandable and age-appropriate format. The panellists' views on the need for further action to safeguard



children's rights, e.g. in the form of legislation, differed considerably, although all stressed the importance of effective debate and the reconciliation of different perspectives.

The discussions at the European Consumer Day 2023 were very topical and thought-provoking. The organisation of an **annual consumer-focused event** by the European Economic and Social Committee is important and a tradition that should be maintained. Special thanks are due to the EESC's secretariat for organising the day and gathering interesting topics and speakers.

1 EESC, European Consumer Day 2023, <https://europa.eu/WktB3F>

2 European Commission, Product Safety Award 2023, <https://europa.eu/lcn87Yg>

## COP28: In the face of scientific reality, great promises must give way to climate justice and translate into action



Arnaud Schwartz © EESC

**Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR)**  
Vice-President, EESC  
Sustainable Development  
Observatory  
Vice-President, France  
Nature Environnement

Alongside civil society from around the world, the delegation of the European Economic and Social Committee of which I was a part, collectively managed, before and during the United Nations Climate Change Conference [COP28](#)<sup>1</sup>, to stress the

urgent need to move away from fossil fuels. However, the agreement of the countries<sup>2</sup> represented in Dubai on the **transition away from fossil fuels seems very fragile**.

At the moment the agreement only covers **the energy system**, forgets the need for emissions to have peaked before 2025 and lacks precision on how it will be financed and the responsibility of historical polluters towards the most vulnerable. In addition, **gas, fossil fuel, is presented here as a transitional energy and carbon capture and storage (CCS) as well as nuclear technology**, which are expensive and potentially dangerous, are

also included in the final text.

We would point out that island states are worried about the introduction of carbon capture technologies, as they could lead to actions that undermine their efforts to reduce emissions. Safeguards are needed around this language.

However, at the end of this COP we can welcome the desire to **triple the production of renewable energies** and to **double energy efficiency by 2030**.

Is the announcement of the **Loss and**

1 United Nations Climate Change Conference COP28, <https://www.cop28.com/en/>

2 United Nations, COP28 consensus, <https://www.cop28.com/en/the-uae-consensus-foreword>

## Damage Fund<sup>1</sup> a smokescreen obscuring the lack of resources for adaptation and transition?

The rapid activation of the Loss and Damage Fund is a step forward. At around USD 700 million, however, it remains **extremely underfunded** in the face of climate impacts, which could be as high as USD 580 billion per year by 2030 in countries that are least responsible for it.

Even worse, **adaptation** – a real life or death situation for the most vulnerable populations – remains **severely underfunded**, as needs could amount to USD 387 billion per year by 2030. COP28 is still unclear on how to bridge the gap and is content to simply ask for a report from “developed countries” by the next COP on doubling financing for adaptation, in order to reach USD 40 billion per year by 2025.

During this COP, the **framework for carbon markets** was heavily debated and the related texts ultimately rejected, as they could have undermined the integrity of the [Paris Agreement](#)<sup>2</sup>. But be warned – it will be discussed again in Baku at [COP29](#)<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, greater advancement on the more general issue of **financing the energy transition**, in particular from rich countries



Closing plenary, UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP28), Expo City Dubai, 13 December 2023, United Arab Emirates © Kiara Worth | UN Climate Change

for the poorest and most affected by climate change, will need to be made in 2024. Otherwise, we're in for a major stalemate in the negotiations in Azerbaijan, with a collective failure to meet the 1.5°C objective at its heart.

### So, what now?

COP28 concluded with announcements about **gradually diverting investment away from fossil fuels**. However, it remains more **necessary** than ever **to keep up the pressure on public and private decision-makers** to assume their responsibilities and invest

the billions needed for fair transition and adaptation.

Today, without the COP, we would be facing a 4°C temperature increase. **With current policies, we are heading towards an increase of 2.1-2.8°C**, but science constantly tells us that the risks of exceeding 1.5°C are unpredictable or even deadly for our species. **So let's continue the dialogue between peoples and our individual and collective actions** at all levels, so that humanity can respect the planetary boundaries and all other living things.

- 1 United Nations, Loss and Damage Fund, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/what-you-need-know-about-cop27-loss-and-damage-fund#:~:text=The%20establishment%20of%20a%20Loss%20and%20Damage%20Fund,and%20impacted%20by%20the%20effects%20of%20climate%20change>.
- 2 United Nations, Paris Agreement, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>
- 3 United Nations, COP29, <https://unhabitat.org/events/2024-un-climate-change-conference-unfccc-cop-29>

## Civil society and elections: winning the hearts and minds of European voters?



**Katrīna LEITĀNE (LV)**  
President, EESC Youth Group  
Advocacy expert, National Youth Council of Latvia

Katrīna Leitāne © EESC

The **2023 Connecting EU seminar**<sup>1</sup> focused on the **2024 European elections**<sup>2</sup>, which will certainly have a strong impact on the course of the EU over the next five years. “Europe is not them. Europe is us!”, emphasised the **EESC President Oliver Röpke**. It is crucial to keep the focus on people’s concerns and to provide platforms for our citizens to speak and to make their voice heard. Furthermore, freedom to choose and to vote should never be underestimated and democracy cannot be taken for granted. Mobilising civil society organisations could help ensure a high turnout, against a backdrop of democratic backsliding in several Member States and a loss of faith in democratic institutions affecting all countries.

The seminar focused on three aspects. Firstly, the impact of **disinformation on the 2024**

**European elections**. Artificial intelligence could have a huge influence on communication by disseminating disinformation narratives about the electoral process in the EU. Strong multi-stakeholder cooperation and much greater collaboration is needed in order to deal with this.

Secondly, the **role of civil society in consolidating values of solidarity and standing up for democracy**. A gap between expectations and opinions exists. It is necessary to look at each country individually and political discourse in each country needs to be taken into account in the context of the European elections.

Thirdly, the **mobilisation of young people**. It is necessary to acknowledge that young people have changed how they participate, now preferring non-institutionalised forms of **political engagement**, and **must be given the tools** to navigate a political sphere that fails to listen and fails to reflect their understanding of politics. If you don't vote, you live in someone else's democracy; young people need to be educated and equipped with the necessary skills and competences.



- 1 EESC, 2023 Connecting EU seminar, <https://europa.eu/IMX8JDK>
- 2 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>



#EUElections2024  
#ConnectingEU2023



# REFLECTIONS

## Enhancing Youth Engagement: the role of ERYICA's "Walk the Talk" initiative in the next European Elections



**Tanja HERCEG**  
Board Member, ERYICA<sup>1</sup>

Tanja Herceg  
Photo © Onurhan Ozturk

In the run up to the [European elections](#)<sup>2</sup>, over 400 million EU citizens face a critical choice in electing 720 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who will represent them for the next five years. These elections are set to significantly impact the daily lives of Europeans, emphasising that the power of democracy lies in the hands of the voters. Notably, **about 16% of voters**, who have the right to vote and shape our future, **are young people aged between 16 and 30 years old, underlining the significance of youth turnout** and the need to be well-informed and engaged in the democratic process.

To foster informed youth participation, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA<sup>3</sup>) has launched "Walk the Talk"<sup>4</sup>, an EU funded initiative **aimed at informing young people** in a youth-friendly manner about the EU, their voting rights and the significance of elections in a manner that puts young people at the centre. At a time

where disinformation threatens democratic integrity and trust in institutions, "Walk the Talk" plays a **critical role in boosting voter turnout**, especially among those new to voting, who may not yet fully grasp the EU's impact on their lives and the importance of their electoral involvement.

"Walk the Talk" explores the **impact of the EU on everyday life** through **nine key priorities** identified by youth information workers: climate change, human rights, mental health, affordable housing, a fair economy, accessible education, full employment, security and safety, and better local opportunities. The [walkthetalkeu.com](#) Web Hub, available in **13 languages** so far, serves as a unique platform that aggregates diverse political perspectives on these key issues, facilitating comparison and analysis. The initiative features interviews with MEPs across various political parties, forming part of a broader social media campaign. This initiative seeks to narrow the gap between young voters and policymakers by addressing youth concerns and combating electoral disinformation. [Walkthetalkeu.com](#) is central to this effort, particularly focusing on first-time voters.

However, the **current underrepresentation of young people in the European Parlia-**

**ment**, with only 7% of MEPs aged 18-35, despite representing 20% of the EU's population, highlights the need for more advocates for youth issues.

This importance is further highlighted by the Eurobarometer, which shows a 6% increase in youth interest the year before the elections, compared to 2018, with youth interest at 49%. This indicates a **growing awareness among young people of the significant role they play in the EU's future**. The "Walk the Talk" initiative is instrumental in this shift, empowering young voices and countering disinformation.

Looking ahead, there is a strong call for future MEPs to recognise the significance of youth work, youth information and the pivotal role of young people in shaping the future of the EU. **It is crucial for MEPs to actively advocate for the needs and interests of young people**, upholding the principle: *Nothing about young people without young people*.



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- 1 ERYICA, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, is an independent organisation composed of national and regional youth information coordinating bodies and networks; <https://www.eryica.org/>
- 2 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
- 3 ERYICA, <https://www.eryica.org/>
- 4 ERYICA, Walk the Talk initiative, <https://www.walkthetalkeu.com/>

## NEWS FROM THE GROUP

### Liberal Professions Category discussing the future of EU health policy

On 22 November 2023, the EESC's [Liberal Professions Category](#)<sup>1</sup> held its third and final meeting of the year, chaired by spokesperson **Rudolf Kolbe**. The meeting focused on the **EU's health policy and the liberal professions' role** in this regard, and had three sessions.

During the first session, **Franz Ferrari** from the Austrian Chamber of Pharmacists spoke about the EU's **strategic autonomy in the field of pharmaceutical products** – or lack thereof. He explained that medicine shortages affect all Member States and can lead to serious public health risks. Europe and its Member States must step up and take action in order to avoid serious supply chain issues in the future.

The second session of the day focused on **ways to professionalise the public health**

**workforce**. **Katarzyna Czabanowska**, Professor of Public Health Leadership and Workforce Development at Maastricht University, said that emphasis should be placed on taxonomy, competencies, education and training. She invited EESC Members to put the public health workforce on the EU agenda to drive it forwards.

The final session focused on **mental health**. **Dr Denis Vella Baldacchino**, Maltese Mental Health Commissioner, explained that mental health is often neglected. Young people are particularly affected and unlikely to ask for help. He proposed a multi-stakeholder approach that promotes wellbeing, prevention of mental health diseases, therapeutic rehabilitation and reintegration and research. He concluded by highlighting the importance of prevention and

recommended lowering stress levels in the workplace and lifestyle changes.



Rudolf Kolbe and Franz Ferrari at the meeting of the Liberal Professions Category ©EESC

1 EESC, Liberal Professions' Category, <https://europa.eu/!MJ76wG>

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST EESC PLENARY SESSION

## COP28: The beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era?

During its December plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on the *Global climate commitments: reflecting on the outcomes of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP28*<sup>1</sup>, with the participation of **Sandrine Dixson-Declève**, Co-President of *The Club of Rome*<sup>2</sup> and **Diandra Ni Bhuachalla**, EESC Youth Delegate COP28<sup>3</sup>.



Sandrine Dixson-Declève © EESC

“We are uncertain whether we will stay within our 1.5 degree target. The influence of the petro-states is clearly evident in the half-measures and loopholes in the final agreement. The final COP 28 text is also extremely weak on how countries will actually pay for the transition and for adapting to the impact of climate change,” said **Ms Dixson-Declève** regarding the commitments made in Dubai.

In an emotional speech **Ms Ni Bhuachalla** admitted to be “absolutely devastated” by the outcome of the COP, which was – in her view



Diandra Ni Bhuachalla © EESC

– full of empty words and a wasted chance to save the future of young people.



Arnaud Schwartz © EESC

Several Members of the EESC Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSO Group) took the floor, including **Arnaud Schwartz**, who attended COP28 with the EESC delegation. He thanked the European Commission for including the EESC’s priorities of sustainable nutrition and just transition in the European negotiators’ mandates. In response to the speakers, he emphasised that: “Whatever your view you need to continue to negotiate. You get nowhere with violence”.



Neža Repanšek © EESC

**Neža Repanšek**, who also participated in COP28, said that the global stocktake of the conference is a blaring emergency siren, urgent and demanding attention, yet the response does not match the urgency. Even after three decades, the process avoids confronting the

real heart of the issue. The conclusions of COP28 were not historical, but “lost in intentional vagueness”. She concluded by stressing that the EESC has to demand substantial action and not accept “hollow promises”.

**Juraj Sipko** took the opportunity to ask the important question: “Who will finance this huge cost that will be caused by climate change?”

**Lutz Ribbe** recalled the COP16 and the outrage when the President of Bolivia walked out in protest because the negotiations were neither comprehensive nor in the interests of developing countries. Ireland sent a similar message at this year’s COP. He stressed that: “what we are calling for and the reality are not in line”.



Corina Murafa © EESC

“We are not rising up to the standards we have set for ourselves,” said **Corina Murafa**, the newest Member of the CSO Group. Member States are taking decisions that are contrary to the deadlines for phasing out coal and reaching carbon neutrality. She called on the EU to hold Member States accountable.

**Kęstutis Kupšys** steered the debate towards the issue of sufficiency. He pointed out that if Europe had not relocated its industry to China, the emissions figures would be different.

## Cooperation with the EESC and other European institutions instrumental for the success of Spanish Presidency

At its last plenary session of the year, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) took stock of the work carried out by the *Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union*<sup>1</sup> in the second semester of 2023 and addressed future challenges for Europe.



Nadia Calviño © EESC

Spain’s First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economy and Digitalisation, **Nadia Calviño**, summarised the conclusions of the Spanish Presidency in a debate with EESC Members, mentioning, among other things, the reform of the electricity market and deepening the Economic and Monetary Union. She said that cooperation with European institutions, and in particular with the EESC, had been instrumental for the success of the busy semester. “My presence shows the strong commitment of the Spanish government to the social partners, social dialogue and civil society. We try to listen carefully and integrate the opinion of civil society into our work”.

EESC President **Oliver Röpké** thanked the Spanish Presidency for its invaluable commitment to advancing the European agenda, emphasising the EESC’s gratitude for the inclusive and comprehensive approach taken by the presidency.

Following the Deputy Prime Minister’s statement, several Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group took the floor. **Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, congratulated the Deputy Prime Minister on a very successful presidency and on her appointment as President of the European Investment Bank – a duty that she is expected to take up on 1 January 2024.

1 Spanish Presidency, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/>



Séamus Boland © EESC

Mr Boland further commented on two interrelated priorities of the Spanish Presidency: progress on the green transition and promoting greater social and economic justice. In order to sustain continued public support for the green transition, Mr Boland highlighted continued support for bottom-up approaches, citizen participation and partnership as essential elements, stating that this would entail “nudging a critical mass of consumers to embrace more sustainable lifestyles”. He also pointed to a new EESC study on [The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU](#)<sup>1</sup>, which had been requested by his Group.

**Giuseppe Guerini**, co-spokesperson of the EESC’s [Social Economy Category](#)<sup>2</sup>, welcomed the

- 1 EESC, study, <https://europa.eu/!mNCntr>
- 2 EESC, Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UK>
- 3 Consilium, press release, <https://europa.eu/!W48nRm>
- 4 EESC, European Semester Group, <https://europa.eu/!Bq97bt>
- 5 EESC, Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>
- 6 EESC, conference, <https://europa.eu/!3WvDdT>

## EESC 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary: the voice of a strong civil society is now more important than ever

At its plenary session on 13 December 2023, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on the “**Celebration of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EESC: Empowering Civil Society, Defending Democracy**”.

“Over the past 65 years, the Committee has built a true platform for civil society to freely express its views to improve EU legislation. In the changing geopolitical context, **the voice of a strong and independent civil society is now more important than ever**. It is civil society, in its role as watchdog, who makes sure nobody switches off the checks and balances, the rule of law or fundamental rights and values – so that nobody ‘unplugs democracy”, said EESC President **Oliver Röpk**e.

As highlighted during the debate, the EESC was an integral part of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#)<sup>1</sup>, whose final recommendations explicitly mentioned the Committee as an instrument for increasing participation and transparency in EU democracy. Recent examples of the EESC’s pioneering role include being the first to call for a proper [European Health Union](#)<sup>2</sup> and for an [EU Blue Deal](#)<sup>3</sup>, and being at the forefront of the ban on programmed obsolescence, which culminated with the proposal of the “[right to repair](#)”<sup>4</sup>.

- 1 European Commission, Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://europa.eu/!CNwFyK>
- 2 European Commission, European Health Union, <https://europa.eu/!7Kb3BR>
- 3 EESC, EU Blue Deal, <https://europa.eu/!6Qhwf>
- 4 European Commission, press release, right to repair, <https://europa.eu/!KKwHFH>
- 5 European Parliament, European elections 2024, <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
- 6 EESC, Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, <https://europa.eu/!kn94kX>

adoption of the [Council recommendation](#)<sup>3</sup> on promoting enabling frameworks for the social economy, which aims to support the social economy’s role in fostering social inclusion and access to the job market. Mr Guerini asked for the role and values of the social economy to be recognised in economic policy, stating that “the social economy and its values need to be part of the new economic governance of the EU”, adding that in economic governance, it should be recognised that there is no stability without solidarity.

**Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC’s [European Semester Group](#)<sup>4</sup>, recognised that the file on reforming the economic governance framework was one of the most complex files anyone could be responsible for. He expressed his disappointment in the direction that the discussions had taken, but hoped for a Council agreement before the end of 2023. In the light of the difficult negotiations surrounding the Multiannual Financial Framework, he hoped for a strong European Investment Bank under Calviño’s leadership: “For the investment needed in Europe, the only hope we have is to

have a very strong European Investment Bank which will provide us with the funding”.

**Jan Andersson** addressed the situation for older people, stating that “demographic development is not a threat, it is an opportunity. Young people and older people can contribute to developing our society through the work carried out in civil society organisations”. Mr Andersson called for pension systems that enable pensioners to have a decent life. He also called for enhanced healthcare for older people in order to ensure that seniors have a full and qualitative life.

**Baiba Miltoviča**, President of the EESC’s [TEN Section](#)<sup>5</sup>, pointed to the Committee’s conference on [Rare diseases and the European Reference Networks](#)<sup>6</sup> that took place during the Spanish Presidency. Ms Miltoviča said that the conference had given more visibility to rare diseases and that the Committee planned to continue its work on this issue. The upcoming Belgian and Hungarian presidencies wanted to bring the topic forward, and the European Commission invited the Committee to further cooperate on the issue, which was very welcome.

Former presidents and secretary-generals of the EESC took the floor, as well as the three Group Presidents. **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**, President of the European Committee of the Regions, sent a video message.

**Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, called for the EESC to be fully mobilised for the [2024 European elections](#)<sup>5</sup>. “The EU must bring collective problem-solving to common European challenges. Whether we achieve this will largely depend on the results of next year’s European Parliament elections. The EESC and its Members have a mandate and a responsibility to reach out to citizens through their networks of civil society organisations to address disinformation, fears and lack of trust. We must also reiterate our call for real measures to implement dialogue with civil society at EU level in all policy areas,” said Mr Boland.

**Baiba Miltoviča**, President of the EESC’s [TEN Section](#)<sup>6</sup>, drew attention to the fact that participatory democracy, through an open, transparent and structured dialogue between the EU institutions and civil society, is becoming more and more important. The EESC has an important role to play in this dynamic, as it is the EU’s sole body at interinstitutional level, whose



Baiba Miltoviča © EESC

Members and civil society organisations form a unique network that not only provides expertise but also helps validate and legitimise policy actions.

**Krzysztof Balon**, Vice-President of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, highlighted that since his appointment as an EESC Member in 2010, he has experienced an excellent culture of consensual discussions and decisions, allowing unity between different areas of interest and different Member States. “It is very important to take this culture of respect to our organisations, to our communities back home, to our Member States. This is the added value of the EESC and its Members,” he said.



Krzysztof Balon © EESC

# OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 13 and 14 December 2023. The EESC plenary adopted 32 opinions, of which twelve were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, and one resolution on the EESC's support for the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area<sup>1</sup>. A list of the recent work can be found below.

**Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU)**, co-rapporteur, SOC/768<sup>2</sup> For an EU framework for national homeless strategies based on the principle of "Housing First"

**Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR)**, rapporteur, NAT/905<sup>3</sup> Seeds and other plant and forest reproductive material

**Benjamin RIZZO (MT)**, rapporteur, ECO/627<sup>4</sup> Faster and Safer Tax Excess Relief

**Christian MOOS (DE)**, rapporteur, REX/571<sup>5</sup> Strengthening Multilateralism and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of Civil Society contribution to the UN system

**Dovilė JUODKAITĖ (LT)**, rapporteur, SOC/780<sup>6</sup> Revision of the victims' rights directive

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**, rapporteur, SOC/770<sup>7</sup> The climate crisis and its effect on vulnerable groups

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**, rapporteur, ECO/612<sup>8</sup> Main challenges faced by EU islands, and mountainous and sparsely populated areas

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**, rapporteur-general, SOC/785<sup>9</sup> European Disability Card and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities

**João NABAIS (PT)**, rapporteur, INT/1038<sup>10</sup> Open finance and payments

**Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT)**, rapporteur, SOC/779<sup>11</sup> International protection of adults

**Simo TIAINEN (FI)**, rapporteur, NAT/899<sup>12</sup> The impact of high energy prices on the agricultural sector and rural areas

**Tymoteusz Adam ZYCH (PL)**, rapporteur, INT/1014<sup>13</sup> Revision of the toy safety directive

1 EESC resolution, <https://europa.eu/!brgNGJ>

2 EESC opinion SOC/768, <https://europa.eu/!XWmv83>

3 EESC opinion NAT/905, <https://europa.eu/!67t3bX>

4 EESC opinion ECO/627, <https://europa.eu/!wY6dXf>

5 EESC opinion REX/571, <https://europa.eu/!TBKxYb>

6 EESC opinion SOC/780, <https://europa.eu/!wKVYrj>

7 EESC opinion SOC/770, <https://europa.eu/!qJxVcj>

8 EESC opinion ECO/612, <https://europa.eu/!tMDyp4>

9 EESC opinion SOC/785, <https://europa.eu/!IRVdM6C>

10 EESC opinion INT/1038, <https://europa.eu/!YM4xW4>

11 EESC opinion SOC/779, <https://europa.eu/!DNbYVR>

12 EESC opinion NAT/899, <https://europa.eu/!FnrCR4>

13 EESC opinion INT/1014, <https://europa.eu/!xFhP7y>

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the [Committee's website](#)<sup>14</sup>

The **next EESC plenary session** will take place on **14 and 15 February 2024**. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit [our website](#)<sup>15</sup>.

A list including all **new work appointments** of Civil Society Organisations' Group Members is available on the [Committee's website](#)<sup>16</sup>.

14 EESC opinions, <https://europa.eu/!Dq84qG>

15 EESC plenary sessions, <https://europa.eu/!TKChb8>

16 EESC, New work appointments, <https://europa.eu/!nHqD8k>

## UPCOMING EVENTS



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