

23  
TERM OF  
OFFICE

25

**Oliver Röpke**  
President of the EESC

**STAND UP  
FOR DEMOCRACY**

**SPEAK UP  
FOR EUROPE**

***ACHIEVEMENTS REPORT***  
*April 2023 – September 2025*



**European Economic  
and Social Committee**



# MESSAGE

from EESC President  
Oliver Röpke



When I took office in April 2023, Europe was at a crossroads: war had returned to our continent, testing our solidarity and our values. The multilateral and rules-based order was under strain, with new geopolitical rivalries, a changing transatlantic partnership, and direct challenges to the European Union and its institutions. At the same time, Europeans faced a cost-of-living crisis, high inflation, demographic pressures, and the twin green and digital transitions that are reshaping our societies.

In this turbulent context, one thing was clear: European organised civil society could not stand aside. Our role was – and remains – essential to defending democracy, building trust, and shaping transitions that leave no one behind. This is why our guiding pledge, “Stand Up for Democracy, Speak Up for Europe”, was not a slogan, but a necessity.



Together, we rose to this challenge.

- We repositioned the EESC as a central and respected partner in the EU's institutional architecture.
- We launched the Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative, giving civil society in candidate countries a real seat at the European table.
- We advanced the Youth Test, making young people's future a cornerstone of our policymaking.
- We made equality a defining priority, achieving historic progress on gender equality and the fight against discrimination.
- We championed the EU Blue Deal, placing water security on Europe's political agenda for the first time.
- We reinforced our role in the multilateral system at a time when it was increasingly contested, raising the visibility of civil society at the United Nations, from the High-Level Political Forums to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and at the G20, where we stood as Europe's democratic voice in shaping global solutions.
- And we strengthened Europe's global partnerships through strategic alliances with Africa and Latin America, AICESIS, and the ILO Global Coalition for Social Justice.



These achievements demonstrate that the EESC is more than an advisory body. It is Europe's civil society voice for democracy, social justice, and sustainability.

Looking ahead, the next Presidency inherits an EESC that is more visible, more relevant, and more united than ever. The task now is to consolidate and deepen these gains: to ensure that the EU's strategic choices – from competitiveness to enlargement, from climate action to social rights – are firmly rooted in the voices of citizens, workers, businesses and civil society.

The challenges remain immense, but so does our determination. We have shown that when democracy is under pressure, Europe needs us most. And we have proven that the EESC is ready to stand up, speak up, and deliver for Europe's future.

Our collective achievements are a testament to what the EESC can deliver when it speaks with unity, conviction, and courage. They are the fruit of collective leadership: of Members who brought expertise and commitment, of the Groups who forged consensus, and of the administration who turned vision into delivery. Here I would also like to pay particular tribute to my Vice-Presidents: Krzysztof Pater, whose tireless stewardship of the budget ensured that we could match ambition with resources, and Laurențiu Plosceanu, whose leadership in communication gave visibility and impact to our work across Europe. Their dedication has been indispensable to the success of this Presidency

I want to express my deepest gratitude to all who contributed along the way. As my mandate comes to a close, I extend my very best wishes to the future leadership and to all EESC Members. May you continue to carry forward our shared vision with pride, conviction, and determination: standing up for democracy, speaking up for Europe, and always "Proud to be EESC".

**Oliver Röpke**

*President of the European Economic and Social Committee (2023–2025)*



# ACHIEVEMENTS 2023–2025 at a Glance

## Engagement & Cooperation

40+

high-level bilateral meetings with EU leaders (Commission, Council, Parliament, CoR)

127+

meetings with Heads of States, Prime Ministers and Ministers

10+

formal interinstitutional agreements or memoranda signed (e.g. with DG NEAR, AU ECOSOCC, AICESIS)

6

landmark participations in UN & G20 conferences

## Democracy & Civil Society

40

youth-tested opinions

20+

youth councils and organisations engaged

5

editions of the Erasmus of organised civil societies, involving 7 NESCs

2

new intercontinental partnerships: Africa (AU ECOSOCC) & Brazil (Round Table)

## Equality & Inclusion

First

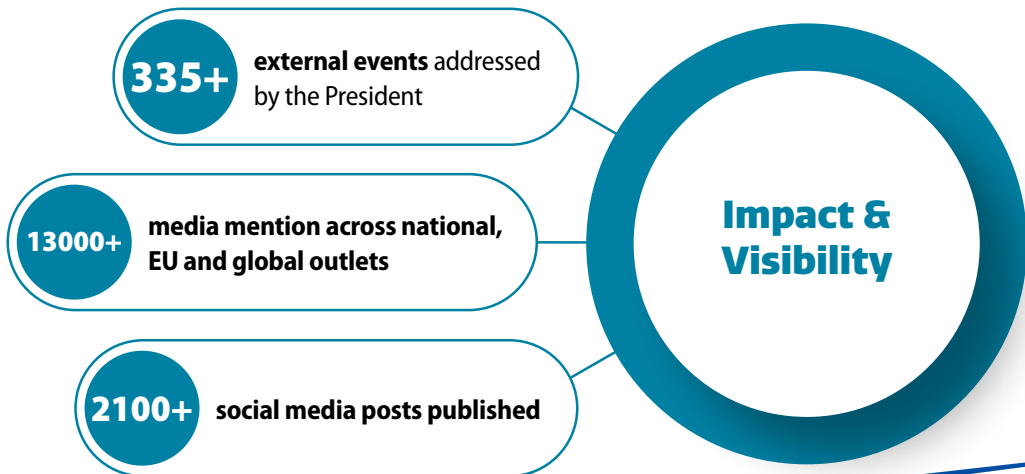
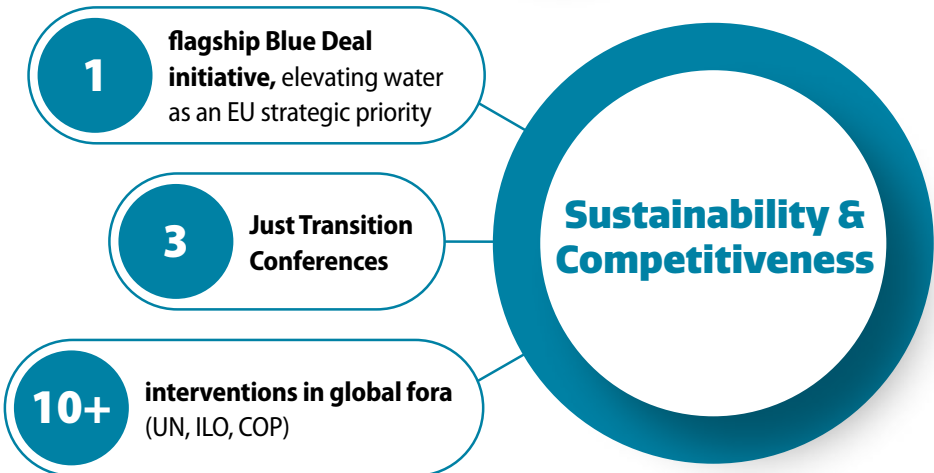
1<sup>st</sup> EU body to endorse the Declaration for a Gender-Equal Society

First

1<sup>st</sup> ever EESC participation in the UN Commission on the Status of Women

10+

major debates and events on equality, diversity, and LGBTQIA+ rights







**STAND UP  
FOR DEMOCRACY  
AT HOME**

# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

## *in times of threat*

When I assumed the Presidency in 2023, Europe faced an unprecedented assault on democracy. Populism and extremism were on the rise, disinformation spread at lightning speed across digital platforms, and foreign actors sought to destabilise our institutions. Against this backdrop, the EESC had to rise to the occasion: not as a passive observer, but as a proactive defender of democracy and civil society space.

This was the spirit of our guiding pledge: “Stand Up for Democracy, Speak Up for Europe.” It was not a slogan, it was a mission.

### **Bringing citizens closer to Europe**

Throughout my mandate, I made it a priority to ensure that organised civil society has a structured, permanent, and respected voice at the European table. Together, we turned challenges into opportunities to strengthen Europe’s democratic resilience:

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- In February 2024, together with Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, we underlined that defending democracy starts with reinforcing civil dialogue and citizens’ participation.
  - In March 2024, we transformed the former Civil Society Days into the first-ever Civil Society Week, a flagship innovation of my Presidency. This became a cornerstone of Europe’s democratic architecture, confronting polarisation and disinformation head-on, and giving civil society, youth, academics, and policymakers a shared space to debate and defend democracy.
  - In 2025, the second edition of the Civil Society Week went even further, focusing on resilience against external threats, strategies to overcome polarisation, and empowering citizens’ ownership of Europe’s future. The EESC Civil Society Week is now firmly established as one of the EU’s key platforms for defending democracy.
  - We made the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) a central pillar of our work. Through the ECI Day, we gave Europe’s citizens a stronger say in policymaking, engaging directly with campaigners from initiatives such as Dignity in Europe, Fur Free Europe and My Voice, My Choice.

## Defending democracy in the run-up to the 2024 European elections

The 2024 European elections were a defining moment for our Union. In the face of foreign interference, disinformation, and populist attempts to undermine trust, the EESC worked tirelessly to protect Europe's democratic foundations:

- We actively backed the Commission's Defence of Democracy package and supported its supervisory role over very large online platforms.
- We renewed our Cooperation Agreement with the European Parliament, institutionalising civil society as a partner in safeguarding democracy.
- Together with the Parliament, we launched joint campaigns under the banner #UseYourVote and hosted public debates branded "Rise Up for Democracy".
- Through these efforts, we helped raise voter participation and restore citizens' trust in European democracy.
- Following the results, I issued a statement warning against concessions to far-right and anti-EU forces and called on democratic actors to appoint a Commission committed to the rule of law, rights, and social dialogue.



This growing trust in democratic processes was reflected in the EESC plenary debate, the "State of Democracy in Europe" debate at the EESC plenary, where we welcomed EP President Roberta Metsola and leaders of all major political groups to reflect on lessons learned and on the way forward.

Today, trust in the EU stands at its highest level in 20 years, a clear signal that civil society's defence of democracy has delivered tangible results.

## Building a European Alliance of Economic and Social Councils

Defending democracy does not stop in Brussels. It requires building a pan-European alliance of democratic voices. Under my Presidency, I elevated the cooperation with National Economic and Social Councils (NESC) into a genuine European alliance:

- In May 2023, together with CESE and five other NESC, we launched the “Erasmus of Civil Societies”, fostering cross-border exchanges and building a truly European civil society.
- I addressed the French CESE Plenary in September 2023, stressing the urgency of countering disinformation and promoting electoral participation.
- Together with NESC, we created working groups on the twin green and digital transitions and on participatory democracy, producing joint reflections that fed into EU-level debates.



In November 2023 (Madrid), June 2024 (Brussels) and June 2025 (Warsaw), we co-hosted the annual meetings of NESC Presidents and Secretaries-General. The 2025 edition, joined by three Polish ministers, resulted in unanimous joint conclusions on working conditions and housing, transmitted directly to EU leaders.

Through these initiatives, the EESC-NESC alliance emerged as a political force, bridging national and European debates, defending democracy, and shaping Europe’s social and democratic future.

## Democracy as our shared legacy

Defending democracy has been more than an agenda item, it has been the defining compass of my Presidency. From Civil Society Week to the European Citizens' Initiative, from electoral mobilisation to the alliance with NESCs, the EESC has proven that it is not a peripheral advisory body, but the beating heart of Europe's participatory democracy.

Together, we have ensured that when democracy is under attack, civil society stands up and speaks up for Europe.



### Legacy Takeaway: Democracy Strengthened by Organised Civil Society

During this Presidency, the EESC became a pillar of Europe's democratic resilience. Through the EESC Civil Society Week, the Defence of Democracy agenda, stronger cooperation with the European Parliament, and active support for the European Citizens' Initiative, we proved that civil society is not a spectator but a driver of Europe's democratic future. Trust in the EU is now at its highest in 20 years, and the EESC stands as a guardian of citizens' participation and democratic vitality.

# DEFENDING EUROPE'S CORE:

## *Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights, and Civic Space*



### **Civil society on the frontline of Europe's values**

When I took office, it was clear that Europe's fundamental values - democracy, the rule of law, and human rights - were under direct attack. Authoritarian tendencies, judicial interference, media capture, and the shrinking of civic space were no longer distant risks, they were unfolding within our Union. Against this backdrop, the EESC rose to its responsibility as Europe's civil society watchdog.

Throughout my Presidency, we made one thing clear: fundamental rights and the rule of law are not negotiable. They are the foundations of the European project, and defending them requires constant vigilance and political courage.

We spoke out forcefully, against smear campaigns and the intimidation of journalists, against the erosion of judicial independence, against the abuse of emergency powers, and against the disregard of ECJ rulings that threaten both democracy and the proper functioning of the Single Market. At the same time, we welcomed and encouraged reforms that strengthened media pluralism, editorial freedom, and judicial independence.

Above all, we gave protection and visibility to civil society organisations, the backbone of our democracies, ensuring their voices were heard in Brussels, Strasbourg, and beyond.

### **The FRRL Group: from commitment to central pillar**

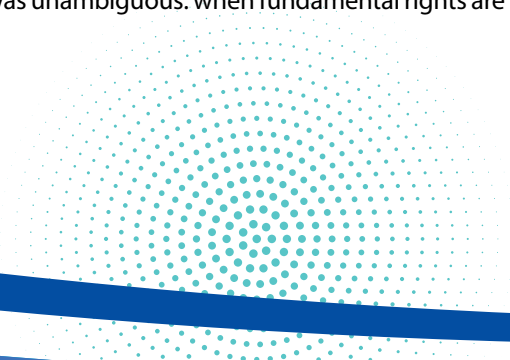
In my Manifesto, I pledged to strengthen the Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (FRRL) Group. I am proud to say that under my Presidency, this Group has become a central pillar of the EESC's work and one of its most visible contributions to Europe's democratic resilience.

The FRRL Group carried out country visits and issued reports that complemented and reinforced the Commission's annual rule of law cycle.

These missions gave voice to journalists, NGOs, and activists on the frontlines of democratic backsliding.

We also linked European fundamental rights defenders with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ensuring that local struggles were connected to global advocacy.

By elevating the FRRL Group's role, the EESC showed that organised civil society is not a bystander but a decisive actor in defending Europe's values. Our message was unambiguous: when fundamental rights are under attack, silence is not an option.



## Fighting disinformation and foreign interference

One of the gravest threats to democracy in our time is the deliberate spread of disinformation and covert foreign interference. From the start of my Presidency, I made it a personal priority to position the EESC at the forefront of Europe's response.


Under the banner "Citizens Can Defeat Disinformation: Civil Society for an Open Democratic Debate", we launched a series of high-level conferences that became action platforms for democratic resilience:

- Sofia (June 2023): on media literacy and critical thinking.
- Chişinău (April 2024): on fact-checking ecosystems in a vulnerable democracy.
- Athens (November 2024): on rebuilding trust in media and supporting grassroots journalism.
- Lisbon (May 2025): with the Portuguese ESC, confirming our leadership role at EU level.



These were not symbolic meetings: they created networks of resilience, linking activists, media, and institutions in the fight against manipulation.

Our political message was clear:

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- Civil society must be equipped with resources to fight disinformation.
  - Independent media must be protected and sustainably funded.
  - Large online platforms must be held accountable for the content they amplify.
  - Citizens must be empowered with skills and tools to recognise manipulation.

This agenda also shaped the second edition of the EESC Civil Society Week, which focused on strengthening participation and cohesion in polarised societies.

## Europe cannot afford complacency

Through this work, the EESC proved that civil society is Europe's first line of defence against democratic erosion. We did not simply react to disinformation and shrinking civic space, we shaped Europe's resilience against them.

This has been one of the most political legacies of my Presidency: ensuring that the EESC stands firmly at the centre of Europe's democratic defence, with the FRRL Group and our conferences against disinformation now recognised as reference points for future action.

Our guiding pledge, "Stand Up for Democracy, Speak Up for Europe", was never more justified than here. At a time when democracy is under siege, the EESC showed that civil society will not be silenced, it will lead.

### Legacy Takeaway: A Watchdog for Europe's Core Values

The EESC established itself as the civil society watchdog for democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Through country missions, the reinforced Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group, and a principled stand against disinformation and civic space restrictions, we showed that silence is never an option when values are under threat. This Presidency leaves behind an EESC recognised as an independent, courageous defender of Europe's democratic foundations.



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#EESCplenary

Comité économique et social européen  
European Economic and Social Committee  
Europäischer Wirtschafts- und Sozialausschuss

European Economic and Social Committee  
European Commission

#EUEnlargement

### OPENING: ENLARGEMENT FORUM


Building an Inclusive Future in an Enlarged EU: The Role of Social Dialogue, Civil Society and Youth Engagement

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SECRETARY GENERAL

PRESIDENT

HEAD OF CABINET



**STAND UP  
FOR DEMOCRACY  
ABROAD**



# ENLARGEMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY:



## *Building Europe's Future Together*

### **The Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative: A Political Breakthrough**

From the very start of my Presidency, I made enlargement a political priority. In my Manifesto, I pledged to open the EESC's doors to our neighbours seeking to join the European Union. And I delivered. The Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) Initiative is not only one of the most emblematic breakthroughs of this mandate. It is a symbol of how the EESC transforms vision into reality. In a separate statement I welcomed the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and announced the EESC's commitment to integrating civil society representatives into its work.

Launched in September 2023, the ECM Initiative brought 147 civil society representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine into the daily work of the EESC. These trade unionists, employers, youth leaders, and NGO representatives joined study groups, section meetings, and plenary debates. They have already helped shape more than 20 EESC opinions. Enlargement was no longer a distant negotiation, it became a lived democratic process, rooted in participation and shared values.

We formally inaugurated the initiative in February 2024 in a historic EESC Plenary attended by Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová, Montenegrin Prime Minister Miloško Spajić, and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. This was not ceremony but politics: a clear message that civil society is the engine of enlargement.

By 2025, the initiative had entered its second phase, guaranteed continuity until 2027 under a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Commission and with strong backing from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Its reach now extends to major EESC events with the Western Balkans and other candidate countries.

The ECM Initiative proves that enlargement begins not at accession, but with participation. It will remain a cornerstone of the EESC's legacy, a living bridge between today's Europe and the Europe of tomorrow.



## Rule of Law Missions: Standing with Candidate Countries

Defending democracy cannot stop at the EU's borders. That is why, under the banner of the Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group (FRRL), I personally led multiple missions to candidate countries, sending a clear message that Europe's values travel with enlargement.

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- *Moldova (April 2024):* We examined judicial independence, freedom of expression, and democratic resilience against Russian disinformation and hybrid pressure.
  - *Serbia (November 2024):* we examined anti-union discrimination, repression of protests, restrictions on media freedom, political interference in the judiciary, and bans on pride parades, all undermining fundamental rights and the rule of law.
  - *Albania (April 2025):* We focused on civil society's role in transparency, anti-corruption, and democratic oversight.

These missions were not symbolic visits. They complemented the Commission's annual Rule of Law reports with an independent, civil society-driven perspective. Their inclusion in the Commission's 2025 report for four candidate countries shows a growing recognition: defending democracy must start before accession.

Throughout my mandate, I led missions to North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Türkiye, strengthening engagement with civil society, holding high-level discussions with government and opposition, and assessing each country's progress on the path to EU accession.

I also issued public statements at key moments where democratic standards were challenged. I condemned Georgia's "foreign influence" law and later denounced the decision to halt the EU accession process. I urged Serbia to stop targeting civil society and respect democratic rights, and raised serious concern over the imprisonment of Turkish opposition leader Ekrem İmamoğlu.

## From Kyiv to Tirana: Civil Society as Europe's Democratic Engine

The most symbolic mission of my Presidency came at the very start: Kyiv, in 2023, the first-ever visit of an EESC President since Russia's full-scale invasion. It was a deliberate political act, signalling that Ukraine's survival as a sovereign democracy is inseparable from Europe's enlargement project.

In Kyiv, I met then Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko (now Prime Minister); Iryna Vereshchuk, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories; Oleksandr Yarema, State Secretary of the Cabinet of Ministers; and Oleksandr Korniienko First Deputy Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, alongside Committee chairs of the Assembly. I also met with journalists, NGOs, social partners, and human rights defenders. Their determination under martial law showed that civil society is Europe's frontline of defence. That mission operationalised our ECM commitment and turned solidarity into structure.

This engagement was reinforced through a series of official statements, such as on the 1000th day of Russia's full-scale war, I reaffirmed EU support for Ukraine's sovereignty and civil society; and on the third anniversary of the invasion, I called for increased EU political and financial backing.

From Tirana to Chişinău, Sarajevo to Kyiv, I made it a point to visit nearly every candidate country in person. Not only in capital cities but in local communities where disinformation and authoritarian pressure hit hardest. In Moldova's Gagauzia region, I heard from journalists under daily Russian propaganda attacks. Their resilience confirmed a principle that guided my Presidency: Europe's enlargement must be rooted where people live, not only in institutions.

We also reached out beyond formal candidate countries. Kosovo will be included in the next ECM phase. Belarus was given a voice when we hosted Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in our EESC Plenary: a moment of historical clarity affirming our solidarity with the Belarusian people. Our message was clear: your struggle is Europe's struggle.



## Enlargement as a Geopolitical Project

This Presidency has consistently framed enlargement not as a bureaucratic process but as a geopolitical and democratic project. Enlargement is about securing Europe's borders against authoritarian interference, rebuilding trust in democracy, and empowering civil society long before accession.

The EESC's approach - embedding enlargement voices in our work, standing with civil society on the ground, and reinforcing democratic resilience - has set a new standard for how the EU prepares for its future members.

### Legacy Takeaway: Enlargement Begins with Civil Society

With the launch of the Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative, the EESC opened its doors to 147 civil society representatives from across nine candidate countries. This pioneering step turned enlargement into a living process, rooted in dialogue, civic participation, and shared democratic values. From Kyiv to Tirana, from Sarajevo to Chişinău, the EESC stood with civil society on the frontline of Europe's enlargement. The legacy is clear: enlargement begins not at accession, but with participation.



# CIVIL SOCIETY AS A GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC ACTOR



From the very beginning of my Presidency, I made it a core political priority, clearly spelled out in my Manifesto, to position the EESC as a Global Gateway for Civil Society. In an era of geopolitical confrontation, disinformation, and democratic backsliding, I was convinced that civil society could no longer be treated only as a domestic partner: it had to be recognised as a global democratic actor.

Together, we achieved political breakthroughs that placed civil society at the heart of international partnerships: from Africa to Brazil, from China to the G20 and the Mediterranean. These achievements proved that Europe's strength lies not only in its institutions, but in the values and civic energy it projects to the world.



## Africa: A Milestone Partnership for Democracy

One of the defining achievements of this Presidency was the historic step of reshaping the EU–Africa relationship by placing civil society at its core. On 17 July 2024 in Accra (Ghana), I signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the AU ECOSOCC, the African Union’s official civil society body. This was not simply a diplomatic gesture. It was a milestone agreement, turning the partnership between our two continents into a structured, citizen-driven alliance.

This cooperation has since been remarkably active and concrete:

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- A joint declaration at the UN Summit of the Future, calling for stronger civil society participation in global governance.
  - AU ECOSOCC’s direct contribution to our EESC opinion on Democracy in Africa, sparking a vital EESC Plenary debate in December 2024.
  - A working visit to Brussels in February 2025, with exchanges on youth participation, trade agreements, and innovative working methods.
  - A joint declaration at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, highlighting women’s role in democracy and development.
  - A joint declaration at the 4th UN Conference on Financing for Development in June 2025 in Sevilla, reaffirming our shared commitment to advancing a fair, inclusive, and sustainable global financing system.
  - Participation in the AU ECOSOCC Citizens’ Forum in July 2024 in Accra (Ghana) and in July 2025 in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea), centred on civil society’s role in peacebuilding, democratic renewal, and reparative justice across Africa and the broader Global South.
  - Collaboration across thematic areas, from our Lisbon Conference on Disinformation to the dialogue on SDG Voluntary Reviews.

Our collaboration has been truly transformational. For the first time, the EESC and AU ECOSOCC worked as equal partners, reinforcing democracy, strengthening trust, and ensuring that civil society voices are heard at the highest political levels, from Brussels to Addis Ababa, and from the United Nations to the grassroots.

Crucially, it will also give the EU's Global Gateway strategy democratic legitimacy. By anchoring the strategy in participation and trust, we will ensure that it is not just a geopolitical investment tool, but a partnership rooted in people, values, and accountability.

This model of inclusive and democratic intercontinental cooperation will remain one of the defining legacies of my Presidency, proof that Europe and Africa can build their shared future through citizens, not only through governments.

## **Brazil: Rekindling a Democratic Alliance**

Another breakthrough came with Brazil. Under my Presidency, we revived the EU–Brazil Civil Society Round Table, dormant for years after former President Bolsonaro had dismantled Brazil's counterpart institution.

This revival was only possible thanks to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's political choice to re-establish the Council for Sustainable Social and Economic Development. With this bold act, Lula restored civil society to Brazil's democratic architecture and reopened the door to structured dialogue with Europe.

Together, we reactivated the Round Table in July 2025 with new Rules of Procedure, giving it continuity and political weight. It now stands as a permanent forum to address shared priorities: democracy, human rights, sustainability, trade, and the fight against inequality.

This was more than a technical restart. It marked the political return of civil society to the heart of EU–Brazil relations, proving that democratic dialogue can be rebuilt after deliberate dismantling. This revival will remain one of the defining achievements of my Presidency and a lasting legacy for EU–Latin America relations.



## Strengthening Civil Society's Voice at the United Nations

From the outset of my mandate, I made it a personal commitment to strengthen the EESC's role as a global advocate for civil society at the United Nations. At a time of authoritarian resurgence, disinformation, and weakening trust in multilateralism, the UN remains the indispensable arena where global rules are shaped. Our task was clear: to ensure that civil society's voice is not only heard, but recognised as a legitimate political actor.

The EESC engaged visibly and effectively in the UN's most important forums:

- **Summit of the Future (New York, September 2024):** The EESC ensured civil society participation was recognised as a cornerstone of global governance, issuing with AU ECOSOCC a joint declaration calling for stronger civil society involvement. Europe and Africa stood together in defence of participatory multilateralism.
- **UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW):** In March 2025, we issued a joint declaration with the AU ECOSOCC on women's empowerment, underlining women as leaders of democratic resilience and sustainable development.
- **UN High-Level Political Forums (HLPF):** We pushed for stronger civil society participation in monitoring the SDGs, insisting that without citizens the SDGs risk becoming a technocratic exercise.
- **UN Human Rights System:** We created direct channels between European NGOs and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, amplifying grassroots voices on rule of law, civic space, and fundamental rights.
- **Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28):** We issued two contributions focused on implementing climate action on agriculture and food security, and the Just Transition Work Programme.
- **UN Conference on Financing for Development:** We called for a rebalancing of climate finance that upholds climate justice, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the principles of multilateral cooperation

Across these arenas, our message was consistent: civil society is not a stakeholder to be consulted, it is a pillar of democratic governance.

## From the UN to the G20: A Global Democratic Breakthrough

This UN engagement was part of a broader political strategy: to secure recognition of civil society as a global actor not only at the UN but also in other centres of governance. That vision became reality in November 2024, when the EESC participated in the first-ever G20 Social Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

For the first time in G20 history, civil society was not confined to the margins, but placed at the heart of global economic governance. The EESC represented Europe's clear democratic civil society voice in a forum too often dominated by governments and markets.

The Final Declaration, drafted by civil society, set out a bold agenda: taxing the super-rich, reducing inequality, accelerating climate action, universal access to clean water and sanitation, and a Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty.



I was honoured to personally hand over this Declaration to President Lula and his Government. His decision to transmit it formally to South Africa, the incoming G20 Presidency, ensured continuity, the beginning of a new democratic tradition within the G20.

The Rio Summit will be remembered as a turning point in global governance, the moment civil society was recognised as a legitimate global actor. And the EESC was at its centre.



## A Global Gateway in Action: The Euro-Mediterranean Future

Throughout my Presidency, I was convinced that dialogue across the Mediterranean is essential. Not only for peace and stability, but for building a shared future rooted in dignity and solidarity.

That is why I was proud to revitalise the Euro-Med Summits of Economic and Social Councils: first in Alexandria (Egypt) in 2023, then in Valletta (Malta) in 2024, and finally in Istanbul (Türkiye) in 2025, to mark the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration.

These summits placed civil society at the heart of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, tackling urgent challenges: youth participation, climate and water resilience, migration, skills, and entrepreneurship. In Istanbul, under the banner of a “New Pact for the Mediterranean”, I called for renewed partnership based on peace, resilience, and opportunity for young people. I also demanded humanitarian access in Gaza and expressed solidarity with Türkiye’s democratically elected local leaders.

These calls were reinforced by a series of public statements on the Middle East, including a strong condemnation of Hamas’ terrorist attacks, support for the Gaza ceasefire and humanitarian aid, and a renewed appeal for an immediate ceasefire and protection of civilians in response to the escalating humanitarian crisis.

The Euro-Med Summits made real what I had pledged in my Manifesto: the EESC as a Global Gateway for Civil Society. Enlargement and neighbourhood policy cannot be built only between governments, they must be anchored in the participation and empowerment of citizens.



## **EU–China Round Tables: Strengthening People-to-People Dialogue**

Under my Presidency, the EESC relaunched civil society dialogue with China after years of interruption. Even amid geopolitical tension, I was convinced that structured, principled engagement remained essential, but only if firmly anchored in EU values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law.

The 19th EU–China Round Table in Beijing (December 2024) marked this relaunch, focusing on youth, gender equality, and the future of relations. The 20th Round Table in Madrid (2025) built on that momentum, addressing connectivity, sustainability, and climate resilience.

These dialogues reaffirmed Europe’s principles while showing that civil society engagement can act as a stabilising force in uncertain times.

## Partnering with AICESIS: The Global Umbrella of Economic and Social Councils

Finally, we strengthened the EESC's global alliances through renewed engagement with AICESIS, the umbrella organisation of more than 70 socio-economic councils worldwide.

In Brussels, I was honoured to welcome President John Hubert Jacobs, Secretary-General Apostolos Xyrafis, and Raul Henriquez to sign a Memorandum of Understanding committing us to closer cooperation. Together, we set out a joint agenda: tackling inequality, advancing climate justice, steering the green and digital transitions, and strengthening democratic resilience.

By joining forces with AICESIS, we proved that civil society can be a stabilising force in turbulent times and that citizens' voices must shape global governance.

### Legacy Takeaway: A Global Gateway for Civil Society

Under this Presidency, the EESC established itself as a truly global civil society actor. From Africa to Latin America, from the United Nations to the G20, from the Euro-Mediterranean partnership to renewed dialogue with China, we placed citizens and organised civil society at the heart of international governance.

We showed that democracy does not stop at Europe's borders. It is a global project, one that must be defended, renewed, and anchored in the daily work of civil society worldwide.

This is the legacy we leave behind: an EESC recognised as Europe's Global Gateway for Civil Society, standing up for democracy and speaking up for Europe on the world stage.





**A more  
representative voice**  
**A New Generation  
Forum**

# OPENING EUROPE'S FUTURE:



## *Youth and Foresight at the Heart of the EESC*

From the very beginning of my Presidency, I made one conviction clear in my Manifesto: the EESC must not only defend democracy for today's citizens but also open its doors to the next generation. Engaging youth was never a symbolic gesture. It was a strategic priority, a political commitment, and an essential step toward strengthening the legitimacy of European democracy.

Young people are not just leaders of tomorrow, they are stakeholders of today, shaping debates on sustainability, digitalisation, democracy, and social justice. Their structured involvement has given the EESC a renewed sense of vitality, credibility, and foresight. Just as we opened our doors to candidate countries, we also opened them to youth: building an institution that is more inclusive, representative, and future-oriented.

### **The Youth Test: A European First**

One of the landmark achievements of this mandate was the EESC Youth Test. After a successful pilot launched in 2022, the Bureau adopted it formally in April 2024, making the EESC the first EU institution to integrate youth systematically into its advisory work.

The Youth Test ensures that young people's perspectives are built into policies from consultation to impact assessment, across sectors as diverse as climate, digitalisation, agriculture, and democracy. Oversight rests with the Youth Ad Hoc Group, created in 2023, which has given the process coherence, accountability, and lasting impact.

The message was clear: Europe cannot legislate for the future without listening to the future.

## A Presidential Pledge Delivered: The Youth Advisory Council

Another cornerstone of my Manifesto was delivered with the creation of the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) in December 2024. More than a consultation platform, the YAC provides a direct, structured dialogue between the EESC President and young Europeans.

This Council advises on institutional priorities and ensures that youth voices influence not just youth-specific topics but the full spectrum of EESC work. It has become a model of accountability and transparency, demonstrating that youth participation can be institutionalised and genuinely shape decision-making.



## Recognition Across the EU Institutions

The EESC's pioneering approach has already inspired others. The European Commission has since adopted a Youth Check and launched its own Youth Advisory Board, while the European Parliament praised the EESC's leadership. Through flagship events and youth summits, we showed that the EESC is not merely aligned with EU youth policy but a driver of innovation in participatory democracy.

## Your Europe, Your Say! Reinvented

We also revitalised the EESC's flagship youth event, Your Europe, Your Say! In 2024, participation was broadened to include youth organisations alongside schools, making the event more representative, impactful, and closely linked to grassroots activism. It became not only a learning exercise but a genuine laboratory of democratic dialogue.

The event concluded in 5 powerful recommendations, which were later embedded into the EESC Resolution to the elections for more impact towards the other EU institutions:



- Create a youth quota for the European Parliament elections.
- Approve the directive for due diligence to make human rights and environmental considerations mandatory in supply chains and in companies for transparency.
- Develop a legal framework for social media to mitigate polarisation and disinformation.
- Develop a standardised common strategy on sexual and reproductive rights.
- Introduce special taxation guidelines for goods and services that are harmful to climate, e.g. luxury goods, and use the money to fund climate-friendly measures.



## From Symbolism to Structure: A Lasting Youth Legacy

Under my Presidency, youth participation moved beyond symbolism to structure. With the Youth Test, the Youth Advisory Council, and a renewed Your Europe, Your Say!, we embedded youth perspectives into the very DNA of the EESC. These innovations are now permanent, visible, and recognised across EU institutions.

## Embedding Foresight in the EESC: Democracy's Strategic Compass

In my Manifesto, I also pledged to strengthen the EESC's foresight capacity. In a world shaped by climate disruption, digital transformation, and geopolitical shocks, civil society cannot be limited to reaction. We must anticipate change, connect citizen insight with strategic foresight, and ensure that democracy is equipped for the challenges ahead.

To that end, we built structured partnerships with Europe's leading think tanks, from FEPS and EPC to CEPS, GLOBSEC, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and the Fondation Robert Schuman. These alliances gave the EESC access to Europe's best expertise while bringing civil society perspectives into debates that too often remain technocratic and detached from citizens.

## The 2025 Conclave: Civil Society at Europe's Strategic Horizon

This foresight agenda reached its peak at the 2025 Conclave, where I represented the EESC alongside European leaders, former heads of state, and leading thinkers. For the first time in history, the voice of organised civil society was present in Europe's most exclusive strategic forum.

Three themes dominated the debates:

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- Defence and security, where I emphasised that strengthening Europe's resilience must never come at the expense of our social and democratic model.
  - Financing Europe's future, where I called for innovative tools to fund the green and digital transitions while preserving citizens' trust through a renewed social contract.
  - Global partnerships, where our pioneering work with Brazil and the African Union was explicitly praised by European Council President António Costa as proof that civil society strengthens Europe's role in the world.

## Foresight as Democracy's Shield

These initiatives proved that foresight is not an academic luxury. It is democracy's shield, a way to prepare our institutions and societies for uncertainty. By connecting civil society with Europe's top strategic thinkers, the EESC has carved out a role as Europe's civil society compass, anticipating the future and defending democracy against volatility.

### Legacy Takeaway: Youth and Foresight

Under this Presidency, the EESC became a laboratory for Europe's future. Through the Youth Test, the Youth Advisory Council, and a revitalised Your Europe, Your Say!, we made youth engagement structural and permanent. Through strategic foresight and partnerships with leading think tanks, we positioned civil society as Europe's compass for future challenges. Together, these achievements ensure that the EESC is no longer only the voice of today's citizens, but also the guardian of tomorrow's democracy.





✦

**A more equal forum**

**EQUALITY**

✦

# EQUALITY AS THE BACKBONE

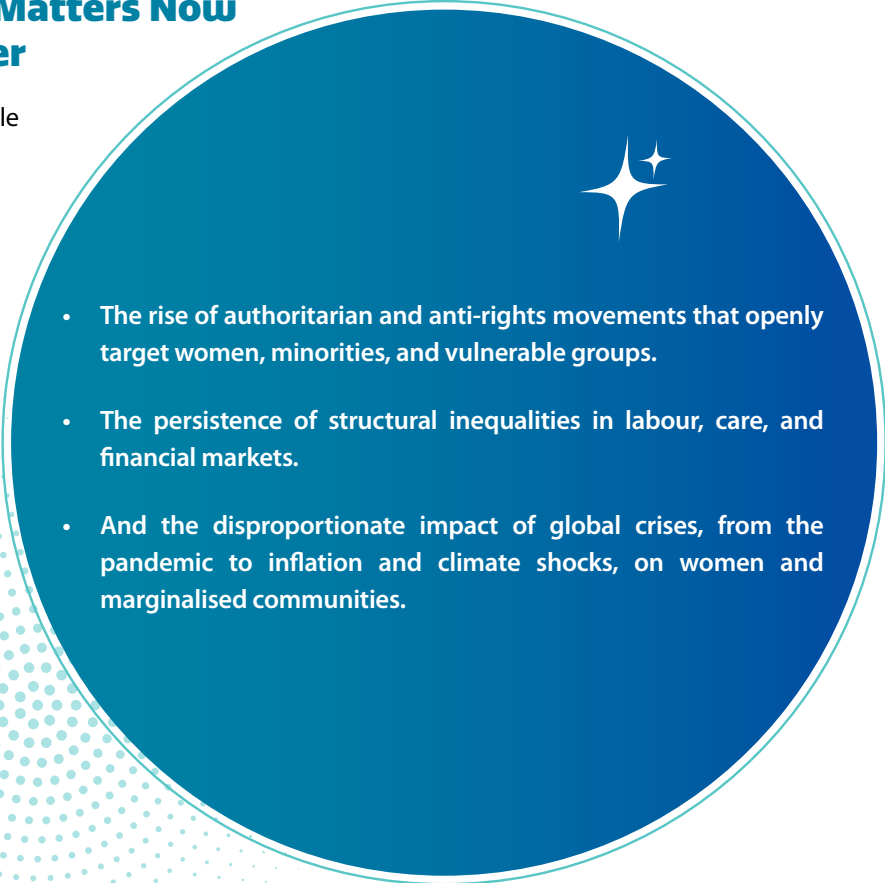


## *of Civil Society and Democracy*

From the very outset of my Presidency, I made one principle unmistakably clear in my Manifesto: a stronger, fairer, more democratic Europe can only exist if it is also a more equal Europe. A Union that tolerates discrimination, gender gaps, or barriers to participation cannot be resilient, nor can it command legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. That is why I placed equality, and above all gender equality, at the very core of my mandate, both in our external action and within the EESC itself.

### **Why Equality Matters Now More Than Ever**

Europe today faces a triple challenge:

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- A large blue circle with a white starburst graphic in the upper right quadrant. The circle is surrounded by a white dotted pattern that fades out to the left. The list of challenges is centered within the circle.
- The rise of authoritarian and anti-rights movements that openly target women, minorities, and vulnerable groups.
  - The persistence of structural inequalities in labour, care, and financial markets.
  - And the disproportionate impact of global crises, from the pandemic to inflation and climate shocks, on women and marginalised communities.

Care work remains undervalued and unpaid, violence against women continues at alarming levels, and women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. In such a context, the EESC could not remain passive. As the house of organised civil society, we had the responsibility to lead by example, making equality not a side issue but a pillar of Europe's democratic resilience.

## Mainstreaming Gender Across Policies and Governance

Throughout my Presidency, we worked to ensure that equality was never an afterthought, but a cross-cutting principle integrated into policymaking and governance. We tackled the unpaid care burden, structural barriers in labour markets, financial exclusion, and the digital divide that disproportionately affects women and girls. Particular attention was given to those experiencing intersectional discrimination: women with disabilities, migrant women, rural women, and young women in precarious jobs.

At the international level, our voice was visible and political:

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- At the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2024 and 2025, the EESC ensured Europe's civil society perspective shaped the global agenda.
  - In July 2025, I was proud to co-sign a Joint Declaration with UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous, committing both our institutions to stronger cooperation on gender equality, from tackling violence against women to advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
  - Working alongside the European Women's Lobby and grassroots organisations, we consistently amplified women's voices in Europe's democratic debates.
  - Interventions at the Equality Council meetings.

## Strengthening Equality Inside the EESC

I have always believed the EESC must practice what it preaches. That is why:



- At the start of 2025, I wrote to the Council calling for greater gender balance in the appointment of future Members and urged for intergenerational renewal, with the inclusion of younger Members.
- We strengthened the role of the Ad-Hoc Group on Equality, transforming it into a central driver of change within our institution.
- We hosted a High-Level Forum on Women's Rights, joined by Commissioner Hadja Lahbib, UN leaders, and civil society representatives, to reaffirm that gender equality is not an accessory. It is a cornerstone of democracy and economic sustainability.

## Towards a Gender-Equal Europe

Our leadership was also recognised at EU level. In June 2025, the EESC became the first EU body to endorse the Commission Declaration of Principles for a Gender-Equal Society. We played an active role in the Informal Equality Councils, ensuring continuity across EU Presidencies and pushing for tangible progress.

## A Legacy of Equality

Taken together, these actions represent not only policy achievements but a cultural shift. The EESC has shown that equality is not an optional add-on, but the foundation of democratic legitimacy and social justice. In line with my Manifesto, we positioned the EESC as a champion of equality within the EU and on the global stage, and as a home where women's voices, alongside those of all marginalised groups, are not only heard but actively shape Europe's future.

### Legacy Takeaway: Equality

Under this Presidency, the EESC became a European and global champion for equality. By mainstreaming gender across all policies, strengthening women's leadership inside our institution, and building global partnerships with UN Women and civil society organisations, we turned equality into a backbone of democracy. This legacy ensures that the EESC is recognised not just as the voice of civil society, but as a beacon of fairness, inclusiveness, and democratic resilience.

# CIVIL SOCIETY

## AT THE HEART

*of Europe's Institutions*

### **From Consultative Body to Strategic Actor: Repositioning the EESC at Europe's Core**

When I stood for President of the EESC, I pledged in my Manifesto to reposition the Committee at the very core of Europe's institutional architecture. My conviction was simple: at a time of war on our borders, disinformation, and authoritarian pushbacks, no EU institution can afford to stand alone. Defending democracy requires structural links between civil society, local democracy, and EU governance.

Over the course of this Presidency, that pledge became reality. The EESC is today more visible, respected, impactful, and structurally consulted than at any point in recent history. We moved from the margins to the centre of Europe's decision-making, not as a consultative afterthought but as a strategic partner shaping the Union's future.

### **From Political Support to Policy Shaping: A New Strategic Alliance with the European Commission**

The flagship achievement remains the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative, anchored in a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Commission and politically and financially supported by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. This initiative gave civil society in candidate countries a structured voice in the enlargement process, a step of historic significance.

Beyond enlargement, I worked closely with all Commissioners and Directorates-General to ensure civil society perspectives were embedded in the Green Deal, digital transition, and democracy resilience, to name just a few. Cooperation with Eurofound, under Director Ivailo Kalfin, and other EU Agencies created new openings for youth engagement and civic participation in both Member States and candidate countries.



## Embedding Civil Society in Parliamentary Democracy: A Partnership Restored

For the first time in years, cooperation with the European Parliament was revitalised and formalised through a new-generation interinstitutional agreement with President Roberta Metsola.

This partnership delivered immediate results: after several years, Parliament once again requested exploratory opinions from the EESC. I systematically engaged with MEPs across all key committees such as ECON, FEMM, EMPL, and INTA and addressed the Conference of Committee Chairs in Strasbourg on two occasions.

The effect was tangible: the EESC's positions became structurally embedded in Parliament's work on all policy aspects, from trade, gender equality, enlargement, Social Europe and competitiveness to external relations. Civil society was no longer peripheral but recognised as an essential partner of parliamentary democracy.



### The European Council's Endorsement: Democracy Anchored in Civil Society

The EESC also gained recognition at the highest level of EU leadership. Exchanges with European Council Presidents Charles Michel and António Costa underlined our role as Europe's grassroots compass.

President Costa himself highlighted the Committee's decisive contributions on Ukraine, competitiveness, and defence, making clear that the Union cannot succeed without civil society legitimacy. This was not symbolic acknowledgment but recognition that the EESC is indispensable to Europe's resilience.

## Two Pillars of Participatory Europe: Civil Society and Local Democracy, Hand in Hand

The partnership between the EESC and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) is more than institutional, it is fraternal. We are truly sister organisations: housed under the same roof in the Jacques Delors building, sharing services, staff, and administrative resources. This day-to-day proximity has naturally fostered a spirit of solidarity and cooperation that goes well beyond formal meetings.

From joint translation and logistics teams to common IT services and security, the two Committees are intertwined in their daily work. This practical cooperation reinforces a shared culture and allows us to pool expertise efficiently in the service of Europe's citizens. Our Members and staff know each other well, making collaboration more agile, responsive, and effective.

But the partnership is also deeply political. If the CoR represents local and regional democracy, the EESC embodies organised civil society. Together, we form the two essential pillars of participatory Europe. Working side by side, sometimes literally in the same corridors, we ensure that citizens' voices, whether local or sectoral, are structurally embedded in EU policymaking.

It is against this backdrop of daily cooperation and shared purpose that one of my highest priorities was to build a strong and trusting relationship with the Presidents of the CoR. Our collaboration was not only symbolic of institutional proximity, but it also produced tangible political outcomes on enlargement, youth participation, equality, and democracy resilience.

### **With President Vasco Alves Cordeiro: A Common Voice on Europe's Future**

Under the leadership of CoR President Vasco Alves Cordeiro, we forged a renewed partnership between our two Committees. Together, we worked on cohesion policy, enlargement, democracy resilience, and youth participation, ensuring that both local leaders and grassroots civil society had a place in shaping Europe's future.

Our joint follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was a milestone, guaranteeing that the outcomes were not monopolised by national governments and EU institutions alone. President Cordeiro addressed an EESC Plenary, underlining our joint role in strengthening Europe's democracy. I, in turn, was proud to highlight how the voices of regions and civil society could converge in common proposals for EU reform.

### **With President Kata Tüttö: Partnership for Equality and the Green Deal**

The arrival of CoR President Kata Tüttö marked a new phase in our cooperation. Together, we advanced the agenda on climate action, equality, and youth engagement. Under her leadership, the CoR-EESC partnership took concrete form in joint initiatives, including our work on informal Equality Councils and the Youth Participation agenda.

I was honoured to address a CoR Plenary during her mandate, reaffirming that our institutions stand side by side in defending democracy and accelerating the green transition. In these exchanges, we demonstrated that cooperation between the EESC and CoR is not simply institutional courtesy. It is a shared commitment to ensure that Europe's policies are rooted in both local realities and civic energy.

## From the Margins to the Centre of the European Project

Through reinforced partnerships with the Commission, Parliament, Council, and CoR, the EESC has been repositioned at the heart of the European project. Civil society is no longer an afterthought. It is a strategic actor in shaping the Union's policies and priorities.

This shift is not only an institutional success, but also a political achievement of my Presidency, proof that Europe becomes stronger, more democratic, and more resilient when citizens' voices are structurally embedded at every level of governance.

### Legacy Takeaway: One Institutional Front for Democracy

In this mandate, the EESC moved from the consultative periphery to a strategic partner at the heart of EU governance:

- With the European Commission, our ECM MoU and portfolio-wide cooperation (from the Green Deal to digital and democracy) made civil society a policy-shaping ally.
- With the European Parliament, a new interinstitutional agreement, renewed exploratory opinions and deep committee engagement embedded our views in the legislative process.
- At the European Council, recognition by Presidents Charles Michel and António Costa affirmed that Europe's strategic choices, whether on Ukraine, competitiveness or defence, require legitimacy anchored in civil society.
- With the Committee of the Regions, our sisterhood under one roof - shared services, daily teamwork - translated into joint political action on enlargement, youth, equality and climate.

Result: organised civil society is now structurally embedded across the EU's institutional architecture.

# CONFERENCE ON THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS

LA HULPE 15 & 16 APRIL 2024



SOCIAL RIGHTS

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✦  
**EESC President  
Oliver Röpké**  
**Moving Forward  
the EU's Social  
Agenda** ✦

# A SOCIAL EUROPE

## *That Defends Democracy*



### **Delivering on the Manifesto: Putting People at the Heart of Europe's Future**

Populism grows where people feel abandoned. From the start, I pledged that a stronger Social Europe must defend not only fairness, but democracy itself. Under my Presidency, the EESC became the political voice anchoring EU strategy in citizens' rights, dignity, and well-being.

### **Social Rights as a Strategic Compass**

From Porto to La Hulpe, the EESC ensured that the European Pillar of Social Rights was not a mere declaration but a driver of policy. We demanded binding commitments, integrated candidate countries into the debate, and co-signed the La Hulpe Declaration alongside Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner Nicolas Schmit, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola and many others. In 2025, with Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu and national ministers, we secured that the new Action Plan will focus on quality jobs, protections, and skills.

### **Competitiveness with Fairness**

Economic strength cannot come at the cost of social justice. In dialogue with Enrico Letta and EU presidencies, I stressed that competitiveness must rest on decent work, fair wages, and strong protections, a message reinforced in Madrid alongside Deputy Prime Minister Yolanda Díaz.

## Just Transitions for All

The green and digital transitions must not create new divides. At COP28 and the Just Transition Conferences, the EESC argued for climate action rooted in jobs, rights, and territorial justice. Our opinion on 'Pro-Worker AI' set the benchmark: technology must serve workers, never replace them.

## Skills and Inclusion

With the "Champions of Excellence" event, organised together with the European Commission, the EESC mobilised hundreds of young people to promote skills and lifelong learning. We also advanced rights for the elderly, persons with disabilities, Roma, migrants, and youth. These actions proved that the EESC is not only a forum for dialogue, but a defender of inclusion.

## Europe's Social Voice Globally

By joining the ILO Global Coalition for Social Justice, the EESC brought Europe's social model onto the world stage. From fair supply chains to women's empowerment, we showed that Europe must export not only goods, but dignity and rights.

### Legacy Takeaway: A Stronger Social Contract

Under my Presidency, the EESC turned social rights into Europe's democratic shield. By proving that fairness and competitiveness go hand in hand, we built the foundations of a renewed European social contract, the best defence against populism and the strongest guarantee of democracy.



# AN INCLUSIVE EUROPE

*that Protects All*

## **Delivering on the Manifesto: Defending Dignity in Times of Division**

Polarisation, hate speech, and shrinking civic space threaten Europe's cohesion. I pledged to make the EESC a guardian of inclusion, diversity, and health, and we delivered.

### **Defending Diversity and Rights**

We stood visibly with the LGBTQIA+ community, affirming that diversity is Europe's strength. From Diversity Month to the International Day Against Homophobia, the EESC's message was clear: equality is a pillar of democracy.

### **Confronting Hate and Polarisation**

The EESC became a vocal actor against sexism, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and extremist narratives. We exposed algorithmic bias, debated AI and discrimination, and equipped civil society to resist divisive forces.

### **Health and Well-being for All**

Citizens' dignity requires protection of their health and safety. We championed workplace safety, mental health, and care, including a European Flagship Initiative for Health and stronger EU action on rare diseases.



#### **Legacy Takeaway: Inclusion as Democracy's Foundation**

By standing against hate and defending health and dignity, the EESC proved that inclusion is not a side issue but the essence of Europe's democratic resilience.

# DEMOCRACY AT WORK

## *and Social Dialogue*

### **Delivering on the Manifesto: A Europe that Protects and Empowers**

Democracy must extend into the workplace. In all high-level events in which I participated, I made clear that social dialogue is the cornerstone of Europe's model and must guide the twin transitions.

### **Rare Diseases: Equality in Action**

With the Bilbao Conference and the JARDIN Joint Action, rare disease patients gained recognition as a European priority. No Union can claim legitimacy if it neglects its most vulnerable.

### **Strengthening Social Dialogue**

Through debates and enlargement initiatives, we reaffirmed collective bargaining as a pillar of democracy. Candidate countries, too, were included in this dialogue, sending a clear signal that EU membership requires social partnership.

### **Housing and Energy as Rights**

Housing and energy affordability are not technicalities, but social rights. Thanks to the EESC, both are now embedded in EU political debate, from the Commissioner's mission letter to the Citizens' Energy Package. The EESC recommendations were also included into the Liège Declaration, concluding the Conference of Housing Ministers organised by the Belgian Presidency of the Council, and culminated in a High-Level Housing Forum organised during the EESC plenary session in December 2024.



#### **Legacy Takeaway: A New Social Contract for Work and Daily Life**

By placing democracy at work, housing, and energy at the centre of EU policy, the EESC turned basic needs into fundamental rights, anchoring Europe's legitimacy in everyday fairness.

# COMPETITIVENESS

*with a Human Face*

## **Delivering on the Manifesto: Sustainability, Justice, and Cohesion**

Competitiveness is hollow if divorced from fairness and sustainability. Under my Presidency, the EESC showed that Europe's economic future must rest on justice, cohesion, and the planet. We reinforced our cooperation at the highest level with the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions, the rotating presidencies of the Council and the European Parliament.

## **The EU Blue Deal: Water as a Strategic Priority**

For the first time, water was elevated to the same level as energy and climate. With the Water Forum, the EESC made water security a European and global priority. Through our active participation in the Euromed Summit 2023, in the 2023 EU-Africa stakeholders' Network meeting, and our exchanges with other EU institutions, we have raised our voice at EU and global level.



## Economic Governance for People and Planet

We argued for fiscal rules that enable social, green, and digital investment. In cost-of-living debates, we advanced concrete proposals on wages, housing, and food, proving that competitiveness must serve citizens.

## Cohesion as Europe's Backbone

We defended cohesion policy as Europe's long-term investment in fairness and unity, ensuring it remains a living social contract with citizens. From bilateral meetings with European Commissioners and the ECON Committee President, to my participation at the presentation of the High-level report on the future of cohesion policy, informal ministerial meetings and the Cohesion Forum, we have shared our views for a modernised and more democratic cohesion policy that preserves its core policy objectives.

### Legacy Takeaway: Competitiveness Rooted in Justice

Through the Blue Deal, cost-of-living action, and defence of Cohesion Policy, the EESC showed that Europe's competitiveness must be sustainable, people-centred, and resilient.

# CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE HELM

*of Europe's Green and Social Transformation*



## **Delivering on the Manifesto: Linking Climate Justice to Democracy**

The Green Deal cannot succeed without a Social Deal. Under my leadership, the EESC became Europe's voice for sustainable development, embedding civil society in climate and social governance.

## **A Global Actor for Sustainability**

At the UN HLPF and Financing for Development Conference, I defended a fairer global system and a democratic SDG strategy. We proved that Europe's civil society can shape global sustainability debates.

## **Climate Justice and Just Transition**

From COP28 to the Just Transition Conferences, we demanded climate targets and frameworks rooted in fairness, labour rights, and territorial justice.



## Circular Economy as Competitiveness Redefined

By relaunching the Circular Economy Platform, the EESC positioned circularity as Europe's path to autonomy, green jobs, and resilience.

## Food, Farming, and Rural Futures

We placed agriculture and rural renewal high on the agenda, linking them to youth engagement and sustainability.

## Transport for Cohesion and Climate Neutrality

The EESC demanded a TEN-T network that is climate-proof, inclusive, and integrated with candidate countries.

### Legacy Takeaway: A Civil Society Compass for the Green Deal

By embedding fairness into sustainability, the EESC proved that Europe's transformation must be driven not only by governments and markets, but by the voices of its citizens.





# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY, SHAPING EUROPE:

## *The Presidency in Perspective*

When I took office as President of the European Economic and Social Committee, I pledged in my Manifesto to stand up for democracy and speak up for Europe. This was not an abstract ambition. It was a necessity in a time of geopolitical uncertainty, democratic backsliding, disinformation, war on our borders, and direct challenges to the European Union and its institutions.

In these turbulent years, the EESC has proven that Europe cannot be resilient without its people, its organised civil society, and its communities. Together with our Members, our leadership, and our dedicated administration, we turned words into action and built lasting structures of participation, solidarity, and trust.

We placed social justice and equality at the heart of the European project. From gender equality to the defence of LGBTQIA+ rights, from workers' dignity to intergenerational fairness, we made clear that democracy is not credible if it excludes, discriminates, or leaves people behind. We launched permanent mechanisms like the Youth Test and the Youth Advisory Council, making young people not symbolic participants but structural partners in shaping Europe's future.

We anchored economic change in fairness. We insisted that competitiveness must be social in character, that the green and digital transitions must leave no one behind, and that housing, energy, and water must be recognised as fundamental rights. With the Blue Deal, we placed water security at the centre of Europe's agenda, creating a new pillar of resilience and a lasting contribution to the Union's future.

We revitalised Europe's democratic partnership with the world. From the historic Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union's ECOSOCC, to the revival of the EU–Brazil Civil Society Round Table, to our active presence in the UN and the first-ever G20 Social Summit, we showed that Europe's credibility abroad depends on giving voice to its citizens at home. The EESC became Europe's Global Gateway for Civil Society, proving that multilateralism can only endure if it is anchored in participation and trust.

We also secured a central place for organised civil society in the EU's institutional architecture. Through renewed partnerships with the Commission, Parliament, Council, and our sister institution, the Committee of the Regions, the EESC moved from the margins to the centre of Europe's political life. Today, organised civil society is recognised not as a stakeholder to be consulted, but as a strategic actor in shaping Europe's direction.

Above all, we demonstrated that the EESC is not just a consultative body. It is the voice and conscience of European democracy, a compass that orients Europe towards justice, inclusion, and resilience.

As I look back, I do so with pride in what we all have achieved together: EESC Members, leadership, and administration, in unity and solidarity. This Presidency has been shaped by collective courage, shared vision, and the unshakable belief that Europe is stronger when civil society is at its heart. Together, we have defended democracy, advanced equality, and ensured that the EESC stands where it belongs: at the centre of the European project. As I hand over to my successor, I do so with gratitude to all Members, staff, and partners who have made this journey possible. Our work has proved one truth beyond doubt: civil society is Europe's democratic anchor. And in all these achievements, I remain deeply "Proud to be EESC".

**Oliver Röpke**

*President of the European Economic and Social Committee (2023–2025)*







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