



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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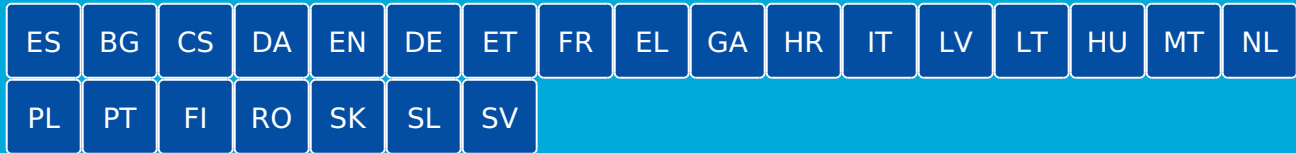
[The Grassroots View - S4 Episode 7: Too young, too old, barred from voting - speaking up in the EU elections](#)

Welcome to The Grassroots View, the podcast of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). With the 2024 European elections around the corner, we are looking at the hopes and concerns of three groups whose voices are often neglected by policymakers: people with disabilities, senior citizens and young people.

Our guests are **Milan Šveřepa**, president of Inclusion Europe, who discusses the accessibility of the 2024 European elections. Youth activist and influencer **Nina Skočak** tells us what's at stake for young people. We learn from **Dr Heidrun Mollenkopf**, the president of AGE Platform, which advocates for senior citizens, whether older people feel included in election debates or dismissed and written off by politicians. The EESC's vice-president for communication, **Laurențiu Plosceanu**, speaks about what the EESC does to keep amplifying the voices of civil society, making sure that the more vulnerable do not get sidelined or marginalised.

Listen to our [podcast](#), use your vote and speak up for the Europe you want!

Available Languages:



EDITORIAL



Editorial

Enlargement is a logical step forward for Europe

This month, we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the EU's great enlargement. It was in May 2004 when citizens of Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia became EU citizens. It was not an easy process, as EU accession is known to be arduous and time-consuming. However, twenty years later we can say that the 2004 enlargement was a success story.

Apart from the EU becoming one of the world's largest single markets, the enlargement led to the creation of 26 million new jobs. Success, however, cannot be measured only in economic gains. The enlargement eventually led to the opening up of borders, with millions of people free to travel, work and live anywhere in the EU. What had previously been a privilege of some became the right of everyone. To date, over 2.7 million students from the 10 new countries have participated in an Erasmus+ exchange programme. The enlarged EU provided equal opportunities for everyone to thrive.

Success does not mean there were no lessons to learn. It was the first enlargement of this kind and magnitude, and there are certainly many areas where the EU could and should do better. Firstly, the EU must start integrating the candidate countries into its work as soon as possible. Progressive integration is not a replacement for actual accession. It is a way for both sides to build a solid foundation by learning from another, exchanging experiences and sharing views. It is a way to establish human connections and nurture a true European spirit.

Secondly, the EU's core principles of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights and freedoms are non-negotiable and cannot be overlooked. While the EU's accession handbook has clear criteria

regarding 'fundamentals', there are some aspects that go beyond any handbook. As the house of civil society, the EESC believes that a vibrant civil society and strong social dialogue are key ingredients for well-functioning democracies. Gradually integrating civil society from candidate countries into the EU will give them the ability to become as strong as they should be by the time of accession. This is why the EESC has launched its initiative to integrate the EU candidate countries. The 'enlargement candidate members' are now working with our EESC members, drafting opinions on topics particularly relevant to future rounds of enlargement.

This is also why the EESC members will discuss the 20th anniversary of the EU's enlargement during its May plenary – taking stock of the past and looking forward to a common future of a more resilient, democratic and united EU.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

6 June 2024

[Imbalances in social protection in general and specifically for "new forms of work" and "atypical workers"](#)

19 June 2024

[2024 Annual meeting of Presidents and Secretaries-general](#)

26 June 2024

[Conference on Affordable Energy: Turning civil society views into action](#)

10-11 July 2024

EESC plenary session



ONE QUESTION TO...

We sat down with the rapporteur of the EESC opinion on EU-UK youth engagement, **Cillian Lohan**, to ask him about the potential benefits of a youth mobility scheme, proposed by the European Commission and backed by the EESC. The scheme would make it easier for young UK and EU citizens to live, study and work in the EU or the UK, respectively. Now that the has UK rejected the proposed EU-wide deal on the free movement of young people, what are other possible approaches to restore the ties severed by Brexit?



THE REAL VALUE OF MOBILITY LIES IN THE SHARED EXPERIENCES - WE WILL CONTINUE TO PUSH FOR THIS

By Cillian Lohan

The movement of people around the EU has brought multiple benefits for all involved. The movement of young people has been especially important, as it has enabled them to sample different cultures within Europe and experience the way of life in other European countries. It has also allowed them to understand that we have much in common. Visiting another country for work or study helps us all to understand our common humanity. No matter our language, our diet or our weather, we share so many things - relations with family and friends, hopes and struggles, challenges and opportunities.

It is these exchanges between countries that creates a society of adults sympathetic to and understanding of other people. We no longer see our neighbouring European citizens as strangers, but as friends.

We should not underestimate the role this plays in maintaining peace and stability in our continent. Movement of young people is the cornerstone of ongoing cooperation and collaboration.

It is in this context that I proposed an Own Initiative Opinion on youth mobility and relations between young people in a post-Brexit EU. Working with my colleagues, staff and members, we consulted widely with the groups affected. This involved EU representatives and UK representatives - meeting online, in person, circulating surveys and exchanging emails. Our work was strongly supported at our EESC plenary with an overwhelming vote in support.

The European institutions responded with a wide-ranging offer of improved mobility schemes for young people in the UK. This has been rejected as a first reaction from the UK side but we will continue to work to show the

benefits for all sides.

We highlight that its not just university students or those in full-time education who benefit from programmes such as Erasmus+ or the Creative Europe fund. These kinds of EU initiatives allow young people from all walks of life to access exchange programmes and experiences that are otherwise difficult to achieve.

There is a cold calculation of the financial cost involved and the financial return. This is only one aspect of the value. The real value of mobility and exchanges lies in shared experience and shared understanding. A vibrant, multicultural continent needs interaction and movement of people. At the EESC, we will continue to push for this. In practicing what we preach, and as a means of leading by example, we are continuing to work with civil society in the UK.

We have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Civil Society Alliance UK, and a specific MoU with SAFE in Scotland (working with our former EESC member Irene Oldfather). We will continue this work and strengthen it. The youth sector has shown leadership in turbulent times, not least in the area of climate action. Let's work together at an institutional level to provide them with all the tools they need to amplify their work, and to harness the power of youth for a brighter future for us all.



Despite being a world leader in the supply of medical radioisotopes, Europe relies heavily on third countries for key source materials and specific processing operations. This has the potential to disrupt supply chains and threaten access to life-saving diagnosis and treatment for many Europeans. To reverse this trend and meet the increasing demand from patients, we need public and private investment in research and development and in new production infrastructure, sound regulation and bold political decisions, writes rapporteur of the EESC opinion on the supply of medical radioisotopes, Alena Mastantuono.



BEATING CANCER BY BEATING EU'S STRATEGIC DEPENDENCIES

By Alena Mastantuono

Every year, more than 10 million patients in Europe benefit from nuclear medicine through the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses such as cancer, but also of cardiovascular and neurovascular conditions.

Radiological and nuclear technologies that use radioisotopes are essential in the fight against cancer at all stages of care, in early detection, diagnosis, treatment and palliative care.

The number of patients benefiting from nuclear medicine is growing, mainly because of scientific breakthroughs. European researchers and businesses have developed some of the latest innovative radioligand cancer therapies, such as pharmaceuticals targeting endocrine and prostate cancer tumours and disseminated metastasis. For example, Lutetium-177 is a very promising radioisotope for the treatment of prostate cancer, which is responsible for 90 000 deaths in Europe every year. In comparison with traditional treatments, modern radionuclide therapy offers good targeting of cancer cells and is often less harmful to the body. Tens of thousands of cancer patients need targeted radionuclide therapy, which is often the only treatment available.

However, before reaching the patient, the supply chain of nuclear medicine is highly complex. It includes the supply of source materials and their storage, irradiation, processing, logistics and application. Once the radioisotopes are produced, they must be processed, shipped and used within a relatively short period of time, some on the same day, others within a few days, depending on their half-life. They are highly and quickly perishable.

Surprisingly enough, these characteristics are not reflected in cross-border transport and customs procedures. For instance, when it comes to cross-border transport, there are several barriers, leading to situations where priority may be given to shrimp over radioisotopes on their way to saving a patient's life.

This is why, in its opinion on the supply of medical radioisotopes, the EESC calls for better cooperation among Member States for the regulatory barriers to be removed. The opinion looks at each and every stage of the supply chain of the radioisotopes in Europe and identifies the hurdles in cross-border deliveries as well as dependencies on third countries. It also brings forward solutions to missing infrastructure in Europe and the need for coordinated R&D.

In the recommendations put forward in our opinion, the EESC is aligned with the conclusions reached at the April summit of the EU heads of states, which stressed the need to reduce Europe's strategic dependencies in sensitive sectors such as health and critical technologies. They also highlighted, in line with Enrico Letta's report, the need to focus on the cross-border provision of services, as well as cross-border movement of goods, including such essential goods as medicines.

Europe has to provide production incentives in order to ensure better strategic autonomy in the supply of radioisotopes. Despite being a world leader in the supply of medical radioisotopes, Europe has critical dependencies on the US and Russia for the supply of metallic high-assay low enriched uranium (HALEU) and for the supply of some enriched isotopes for radioisotope production targets.

The EU remains highly dependent on Russia for the supply of stable isotope targets, which allow the production of certain radioisotopes used in modern or developing molecular radiotherapies, such as Ytterbium-176 used to produce Lutetium-177

This presents a veritable challenge to the supply chain for this specific radioisotope, for which the global demand is expected to triple in the coming years.

The supply chain also depends on the systems of production using reactors or accelerators, as well as on processing and delivery to hospitals. To ensure equal access to care, the Member States, and in particular research centres and hospitals, should work together more closely. Access to radiation therapy is not uniform across the Member States, especially in the development and pilot phases. The aim is to have faster access to medicines in the research phase or in compassionate use, as well as to improve access for small hospitals that may lack expertise and infrastructure. For some patients, this access can be vital.

The European funding of research, development and innovation in nuclear medicine, particularly in the Horizon and Euratom programmes, is crucial to respond to the needs of patients. Europe should have strategic projects of common interest in this area under the EU's future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The European Commission's SAMIRA strategy and the European Radioisotopes Valley Initiative (ERVI) in connection with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan are valuable projects. The European Commission should go further and include nuclear medicine more prominently in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and in the Horizon Europe Mission on Cancer.

Member States should also finance public health policies with a focus on medical radiological and nuclear technologies. This will give a good signal to the industry and will allow research and innovation as well as industrial infrastructure to be developed and grow in Europe. It will also attract more people to the sector.

To conclude, we will only be able to better secure the supply of radioisotopes in Europe and meet the increasing demand from patients if we take bold political decisions.



THE SURPRISE GUEST

After 20 years in the EU waiting room, North Macedonia has seen public support for EU membership dwindle. However, despite the sluggish pace of progress, setbacks and delays (North Macedonia was granted candidate status in December 2005 only to see 15 years pass before accession talks opened, which

is the longest such gap in EU history), the promise of economic prosperity and regional stability

continues to drive the nation's desire to join the bloc. But the EU also has to show that it is willing to advance the accession process and reward progress, writes our surprise guest, Biljana Spasovska, Executive Director of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network and an 'enlargement candidate member' for North Macedonia in the EESC.

Biljana Spasovska is the Executive Director of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), a regional network of CSOs that work together to empower civil society in the Balkans and to strengthen its development. She is also a current co-chair of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, a member of the Global Standard for CSO Accountability partnership, and an 'enlargement candidate member' of the EESC.

Biljana has more than ten years of experience in leading policy and advocacy efforts aimed at strengthening the role of civil society in the Balkans and its voice in national and EU policy processes. She has led and contributed to several regional, EU and global collaborative projects aimed at fostering a more enabling civil society environment, a more credible EU enlargement policy, improved civil society accountability and more effective development cooperation.

She holds an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Bologna and is pursuing a PhD in Globalisation and Democracy.



[NORTH MACEDONIA'S EU ACCESSION: CHALLENGES, PROMISES AND THE WAY FORWARD](#)

by Biljana Spasovska,

Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)

North Macedonia stands at a critical juncture in its quest for EU accession, as the country's journey has been marred by setbacks and delays fueled by unresolved bilateral disputes and waning public support. Despite these obstacles, the promise of economic prosperity and regional stability continues to drive the nation's desire for EU membership.

Public opinion surveys reveal a concerning trend, with support for EU membership dwindling in recent years. This decline reflects broader frustration over the sluggish pace of progress and the perceived lack of commitment from EU Member States.

The country's road to EU accession has been fraught with complex issues that extend beyond North Macedonia's borders. A crisis of democracy and political instability within the region and among EU Member States, coupled with the rise of right-wing nationalism, pose significant challenges to the integration process. However, amidst these challenges, there is room for optimism and renewal, as many people see EU integration

as a pathway to future prosperity and improved living standards. It is also promising that the country is already fairly well aligned with EU legislation.

Moving forward, North Macedonia must prioritise progress on reforms and negotiation chapters in critical areas such as the rule of law, justice, democracy and better public administration. Visible progress in these areas driven by the EU accession process would also strengthen public support for the EU. The commitment to democratic values, regional cooperation and the pursuit of a shared European destiny will be crucial as the country navigates the twists and turns of its accession path.

While the country would have to display political maturity and deliver the needed reforms, the EU must show North Macedonia's people that the accession process is fair, merit-based and moving forward. The political will to advance accession, as demonstrated towards Ukraine, must be shown; progress must be rewarded and steps taken to guarantee adequate capacity on both sides to drive the process.

Lastly, it should be clear that there is no better alternative, for the benefit of all, to North Macedonia or the entire region joining the EU. After all, North Macedonia may be small but its rich cultural heritage, strategic location and commitment to democratic values would bring regional stability and opportunities for economic growth, strengthening the EU's diversity and cohesion.

6-9 June 2024

 Elections

**I am voting.
Are you?**

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS – 6-9 JUNE 2024:

I'M VOTING. ARE YOU?

In the last article for our column, *I'm Voting. Are You?*, Head of Advocacy and Campaigning at the European Blind Union Antoine Fobe writes about the demands made by his organisation to make the elections more accessible. Despite the efforts invested by disability organisations, the EESC and the European Parliament, yet again it is too late for the European elections to set an example.



MAKING EUROPEAN ELECTIONS A ROLE-MODEL FOR ACCESSIBLE VOTING: THIS TIME IT IS TOO LATE

By Antoine Fobe

The European elections are around the corner and we - the European Blind Union (EBU) - encourage

our followers to cast their vote, as difficult as it may continue to be, and that they do so bearing in mind the attention that candidates and parties give to inclusion in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Because visually impaired citizens need to make their expectations heard.

The European Blind Union (EBU) is the voice of blind and partially-sighted people in Europe and we work towards an accessible and inclusive society with equal opportunities for visually-impaired people to fully participate in all aspects of life. Political participation is, of course, an essential aspect, as it allows visually impaired citizens to promote disability-friendly policies and legislation through their vote and political action.

As the 2024 EP elections approach, the participation of persons with disabilities (PWDs) both as voters and as candidates is an important and timely topic.

According to the 2019 report of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), around 400,000 persons with disabilities (PWD) were deprived of the right to vote at the last European Parliament (EP) elections. Less than 5% of EP members have a disability.

For the upcoming elections, as a starting point in its [Statement](#) on EP elections, the EBU is again asking for a standard to be set on accessibility of the vote (voting procedures), of electoral information (election campaign facilities and materials, political debates, political party programmes and websites) and of post-election procedures (e.g. complaint mechanisms), as well as equality in the right to stand as a candidate.

We focus on EP elections because the European Union has competence only for the European elections as an element of EU citizenship and for ensuring equal rights for PWDs within the remit of EU competence. However, since it remains the competence of Member States to organise elections, best practices at EU level would automatically have a 'spill-over' effect on all other elections.

Unfortunately, it is too late to make EP elections exemplary this time round. Not due to lack of interest by the EP itself, on the contrary: in May 2022, it proposed a reform of EU electoral law, focusing namely on guaranteeing the right for PWDs to vote independently and in secret, the free choice of assistance, and the accessibility of postal voting and political campaigns. Sadly, the EU Council has so far failed to respond.

For the next 5 years of EU legislature, EBU is asking the renewed EP to continue pressing the Council to adopt the proposed reform and bring about tangible progress in the 2029 elections. We can count on the support of the EESC which, in 2020, had already called for a formal EP legislative initiative to guarantee real rights for PWDs to vote in EP elections. We can also count on the support of the European Commission which, last December, published a "Guide of good electoral practices" and is now working on a compendium on e-voting practices and the use of ICT in elections, both addressing accessibility aspects.



EESC TAKES PART IN RECORD-BREAKING RUNNING FOR EUROPE

On 26 May, the European Economic and Social Committee took part in the 44th Brussels 20K, which this year made a new record with 45 330 participants at the starting line. The EESC was part of the

Interinstitutional Organising Committee *Running for Europe*, which ran to encourage citizens to vote in the European elections under the slogan "Use Your Vote". EESC Vice-President for Communication Laurențiu Plosceanu, together with the representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament, started the race. Alex Kibet from Kenya finished first in 59 minutes and 57 seconds and Belgian Sophie Hardy, the fastest woman, completed the race in 1 hour, 10 minutes and 56 seconds.

EESC NEWS



European Economic and Social Committee warns Defence of Democracy Package might not deliver on its promises

The European Commission's Defence of Democracy package was the subject of a debate at the April EESC plenary session. Members of the EESC have expressed reservations about its timing and approach, particularly for addressing foreign influence. The EESC argued that not only is the package ineffective, but it could also harm civic spaces in Europe.

Despite its stated intentions to improve transparency and democratic accountability in Europe, the EESC sees the Defence of Democracy package as deeply flawed. It argues that the package has arrived far too late to have any real impact on the upcoming 2024 European elections and has failed to address the Committee's previous [recommendations](#) for strengthening European democracy.

In his remarks, EESC President **Oliver Röpk**e said that ‘when talking about “*dangers*” for our democracies, it is important to underline the strong response of the EU and the track record of the current Commission in the defence of democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. The EESC has also heard the concerns expressed by many civil society actors on what they see as the risks of the package. We need to find a common approach to combine the defence of democracy and all necessary safeguards to preserve civic space.’

While the EESC supports the transparency objectives of the proposed directive on lobbying carried out on behalf of third countries, it strongly opposes the proposed methods, cautioning against unintended consequences on civic spaces. **Christian Moos**, EESC rapporteur for the [opinion](#) on the *Defence of Democracy package*, said that ‘we consider this directive to be dangerous. It resembles a “foreign agents” law. It is potentially stigmatising NGOs. Clearly, the current proposal should be withdrawn. It risks adding to the problem of shrinking civic spaces in Europe, and that is something the Commission couldn’t possibly want.’

Co-rapporteur **José Antonio Moreno Díaz** expressed scepticism regarding the package’s ability to address the root causes of democratic erosion within the EU’s borders. By narrowly focusing on external threats, the package overlooks the insidious efforts to destabilise EU democracies from within, thereby creating a dangerous blind spot.

The Commission acknowledged concerns about the package’s impact on NGOs but believes safeguards are in place. (gb)



[European Economic and Social Committee approves agreement establishing interinstitutional Ethics Body](#)

At its plenary session on 25 April, the EESC approved the agreement establishing an interinstitutional body for ethical standards. The new agreement was formally signed by the representatives of the participating EU institutions and bodies on 15 May. It should enter into force on 6 June, the first day of voting for the European elections.

The agreement is a significant step towards bolstering a common culture of integrity and ethics.

The new EU body will develop, update and interpret common minimum standards for ethical conduct, and publish reports on how these standards have been reflected in the internal rules of each participating EU institution and body.

In addition to the EESC, the following seven EU institutions and bodies will be part of the new ethics body: the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, the European Central Bank, the European Court of Auditors and the European Committee of the Regions.

Each participating institution will be represented by one senior member and the position of chair of the body will rotate between the institutions on an annual basis.

Five independent experts will support the work of the body by delivering opinions upon request. Any party to the agreement will be able to consult them on individual standardised written declarations, including declarations of interest. (mp)



[Commissioner Johansson calls for the EESC's support for a Team Europe approach on labour migration](#)

At its April plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) discussed the Talent Mobility Package. This initiative comprises a series of new measures designed to make the Union more attractive to talent from outside the EU, and to facilitate mobility within it.

Guest speaker Commissioner for Home Affairs **Ylva Johansson** called for the EESC's support in bringing together the Member States and civil society organisations to embrace this innovation and ensure that there is an effective policy on labour migration.

One of the basic measures in the Talent Mobility Package is the 'Talent Pool' initiative, the first EU-level voluntary matching tool, where interested Member States can bring together EU employers with jobseekers from third countries.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** stressed that 'The EU faces severe labour and skills shortages due to the transition to a green and digital economy, and demographic challenges. The talent mobility package can be one instrument among others to alleviate these challenges'.

The European Commissioner for Home Affairs, **Ylva Johansson**, called for a Team Europe approach to labour migration with a broader European dimension. 'Labour migration is mainly a national competence and it will continue to be so. But we need to create a Team Europe approach, with EU institutions, Member States and civil society organisations working together to deliver new initiatives and facilitate the implementation of labour mobility policies.'

EESC member **Tatjana Babrauskienė**, rapporteur for the opinion on the [Talent Mobility Package](#) adopted at this plenary, underlined that 'the EU Talent Pool needs to be a practical, easy-to-use and trusted tool that is attractive for workers and employers. At the same time, it has to support fair and ethical legal labour migration'. (at)



[EESC hails European Parliament's historic vote on combating gender-based violence, reiterates commitment to advancing women's rights](#)

One in ten women live in dire poverty. One in three face violence. We are witnessing a growing backlash against women's rights across the world, including in the EU. With the European elections and the formation of a new European Commission fast approaching, continued institutional and civil society support will be crucial to furthering the empowerment of women and girls.

On 25 April, the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** held a plenary session debate with some of the EU's top organisations championing gender equality to highlight the pressing need to keep pushing for women's rights in the EU's next term of office.

The debate took place a day after the European Parliament gave the green light to the first EU Directive on combating gender-based violence, and its theme was the conclusions of the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW68). The CSW is the world's top international forum for assessing progress on achieving gender equality, and this year it focused on poverty among women.

The EESC contributed to UNCSW68, held in March in New York, with a declaration entitled [A gender lens on poverty](#), comprising 10 action points for the economic empowerment and social protection of women.

"As poverty is not gender-neutral, our response to it cannot be either. Violence committed against women has an impact on women's risk of poverty and their ability to participate on an equal basis in the labour market. I can therefore only welcome the final vote in the European Parliament on the first ever Directive to protect women against gender-based violence and domestic violence at European level," said **EESC president Oliver Röpke**.

Concerted action at all levels has achieved a number of milestones during this Commission's term of office, such as the EU Pay Transparency Directive and the Care Strategy, said **Lanfranco Fanti**, a member of the private office of the Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli.

Participants in the debate called for an EU Council formation on gender equality, an EU coordinator on violence against women and a renewed mandate for the Commissioner on Equality.

"We need political support from the EU," said **Florence Raes**, Director of UN Women Brussels. Despite real progress on equality, women's rights are being undermined to an unprecedented extent and there is a growing danger that gender equality could be knocked off the list of priorities.

"Being a woman and a member of a minority group means that you will struggle. We have to remember that equality is not enough anymore: equality needs intersectionality," said **Ilaria Todde**, Advocacy Director for the Eurocentralasian Lesbian Community.

"Violence against women is deeply rooted in patriarchal systems throughout the world. Today we applaud the adoption of the first ever EU Directive on violence against women and domestic violence," said **Mary Collins**, Director of the European Women's Lobby. (ll)



'We need to export our goods and technologies, but not our jobs. Investment must happen in Europe'

At the EESC's April plenary, Maive Rute, the Commission's Deputy Director-General for Internal Market, and Oliver Röpke, EESC President, highlighted that strengthening the EU's competitiveness was key to increasing the growth and well-being of our economy and society.

According to **Ms Rute**, there is no time to lose. The EU has to act quickly and urgently if it wants to catch up and survive in the face of the excessive power of the world's economic giants.

Assessing the state of play of EU competitiveness, she said: 'What we need is radical change. We cannot leave the implementation of the single market to be carried out through good will – we need real enforcement behind it. We need to export our goods and technologies, but not our jobs. Our industries need to be competitive, and investment must happen here.'

Emphasising that competitiveness was a cornerstone of the EU's economic success, driving growth, innovation, and prosperity while enhancing its global influence and resilience, **Mr Röpke** added: 'When we discuss European competitiveness, we must put people at the centre of the debate and ensure that we leave no one behind. Its ultimate impact and significance lie in how it affects the well-being, opportunities and prosperity of individuals and communities. Therefore, any debate on competitiveness must prioritise the needs, rights and aspirations of people.'

The plenary also saw the adoption of the opinion on the [Long-term competitiveness strategy](#) drawn up by rapporteur **Emilie Prouzet** and co-rapporteur **Stefano Palmieri**. (mp)



Breaking circular ground: EESC's flagship conference leads Europe's transition

This year, **the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP)**, an initiative jointly developed and hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), joined forces with the Belgian Presidency of the EU Council and the Finland-based **World Circular Economy Forum (WCEF)** for its flagship conference on 15 and 16 April.

Held at the Square, the Brussels Convention Centre, and boasting more than 1000 participants and 150 speakers, the conference showcased impactful circular solutions, guided by the latest scientific findings. EESC delegates shared the ECESP's success story.

Cillian Lohan, EESC member and ECESP co-founder, hailed the ECESP as the 'network of networks,' bridging policy-making and civil society for circular progress. **Anders Ladefoged**, member of the ECESP's Steering Group, highlighted its role in discussing Europe's circular progress and gaps, offering a platform for collaboration and learning. EESC's **Maria Nikolopoulou** emphasised the ECESP's growing interactivity, facilitating dialogue through initiatives like #EUCircularTalks.

During the conference's closing plenary, the **Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen** announced two initiatives to support the global transition to a circular economy: the EU Circular Economy Resource Centre, funded by the European Commission with EUR 15 million, and the "SWITCH to Circular Economy in East and Southern Africa" programme, to which the Commission will contribute €40 million over five years. ECESP pledged support for both initiatives.

The ECESP, initiated by EESC and the European Commission in 2017, promotes dialogue, disseminates good practices and provides information on the circular economy to turn visions into actions. The EESC has been actively advocating for circularity, having thrown its support for the EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy back in 2015. The platform serves as a joint endeavour to engage all stakeholders in realising a circular vision, aiming to accelerate the transition through dialogue and cooperation.(ks)



Disinformation is a weapon for foreign powers to harm our societies.

the help of civil society.

The EESC's External Relations Section (REX) organised its 2nd campaign and conference on fighting disinformation as part of its overall project on disinformation, which is to be implemented with

Following a successful campaign in Bulgaria, this time the event was held in Moldova, on 18 April. The country has recently strengthened its capacities in the field of strategic communications and dialogue by setting up two dedicated bodies: the Centre for Strategic Communications and Combating Disinformation, and the Centre for Civil Initiatives for National Minorities.

The conference was held in cooperation with Moldova State University in Chişinău.

Speaking at the conference, EESC President **Oliver Röpkke** highlighted the importance of promoting dialogue and involving all citizens, from various backgrounds and communities, in combating foreign interference and disinformation.

Disinformation typically spreads among the population, often horizontally, which means that the best way to tackle the problem is not with a top-down approach but by means of citizens' reflection and direct engagement. This is where organised civil society can play a crucial role, as disinformation is tearing the fabric of our societies.

Ana Revenco, Director of the Centre for Strategic Communications and Combating Disinformation and one of the main speakers at the conference, underlined that citizens could not fight disinformation alone and the Centre could improve their skills in order to fight toxic disinformation in the long term.

"Eradicating disinformation is an unrealistic goal. Our joint efforts will be targeted at debunking and preventing fake news and mitigating the malicious impact they have on our societies," she added.

Mihai Peicov, leader of the Centre for Civil Initiatives for National Minorities, said that the creation of this centre by the government was an important step for the integration of everyone in society. He added that new educational policies were needed for minorities.

The conference highlighted the role of education and the focus on young people, as many of the insights came from the youngest populations, students and journalists who attended it.

You can watch the video report on the conference [here](#).

[#EUvsDisinfo](#) (at)



[EU-Serbia and EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committees to monitor accession negotiations and discuss the new growth plan](#)

The EESC's External Relations Section (REX) held two meetings with its Serbian and Montenegrin counterparts within the framework of the respective Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs). This

joint institution enables civil society organisations from both sides to monitor the country's accession negotiations, discuss issues of common interest, and point out concerns to be tackled on the path to joining the European Union.

On 5 April 2024, the EESC welcomed the Serbian members of the Joint Consultative Committee to Brussels to discuss the current state of play in EU-Serbia relations and the accession process negotiations with the EU. Other issues on the table included the opportunities for Serbia presented by the new Growth Plan and Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, the post-election situation in the country and an overview of its state of democracy and the rule of law.

The event saw the participation of the newly appointed Head of Mission of the Republic of Serbia to the EU, **Danijel Apostolović**, who underlined the common position between the EU and Serbia for closer cooperation regarding all relevant issues for Serbia's accession negotiation talks.

EESC Vice-President for Communication, **Laurentiu Plosceanu**, stressed the importance of these meetings as they guarantee the presence of civil society representatives, so as to enhance the narrative of European accession in Serbia.

The meeting ended with the adoption of a [joint declaration](#), which will be forwarded to the EU institutions and to local authorities and government in Serbia.

You can watch a video report of the meeting [here](#).

On May 13, member of the EU-Serbia JCC **Nataša Vučković** was elected the new president of the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA). The EESC was represented at the ALDA General Assembly in Barcelona by Mr Plosceanu, who congratulated Ms Vučković on her appointment.

The 18th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) took place in Podgorica on 16 April and sent a clear message to the EU institutions that Montenegro is firmly committed to becoming the 28th EU Member State by 2028.

The JCC members encouraged their organisations, the national authorities and the EU institutions to spare no effort in accomplishing the rule of law interim benchmarks. Obtaining the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) for the rule of law by June will be a turning point in the EU accession process, enabling the provisional closing of other chapters.

Co-chair and EESC member **Decebal-Ștefăniță Padure** said: 'The Montenegrin authorities should fulfil their ambitious goals, and organised civil society should be involved in every step of the accession negotiations.' Co-chair from the Montenegrin side, **Gordana Đurović**, called on all stakeholders to support the efforts to obtain a positive report from the Commission by June.

The chief negotiator, Dr **Predrag Zenović**, pointed out the important role and concrete help of civil society in the negotiation process, with public support for Montenegro's EU membership reaching 80%.

EU Ambassador to Montenegro **Oana Cristina Popa** noted that Montenegro seemed to have finally found the necessary stability to focus on EU accession as its main strategic priority, adding: 'We will all endeavour to

ensure that this opportunity is not missed.'

At the end of the meeting, a [Joint Declaration](#) was adopted, which will be presented to the Stabilisation and Association Committee, the Parliamentary Committee for Stabilisation and Association, the European External Action Service, the European Commission and the Government of Montenegro. (at)



[At the 2024 Open Day, the EESC raised awareness of the importance of voting in the 2024 European elections](#)

The Committee opened its doors to the public for its traditional Open Day on Saturday 4 May 2024, informing and enthusing people about its role among the European institutions and about the upcoming European elections.

During the day, the EESC organised a number of activities at its headquarters, the Jacques Delors building in Brussels. Participants were able to visit the premises and discover what the EESC could do for people, learn about the Committee's role in the EU decision-making process, and share their interests and concerns with EESC members.

Visitors also had the opportunity to find out what EESC members do back in their home countries and take part in live activities such as interactive games, an EU quiz, and face painting for children.

In the morning, the Committee also welcomed the arrival of a group of EESC members and staff who had cycled hundreds of kilometres across France and Belgium to raise awareness about the importance of the European elections.

Headed by EESC member **Bruno Choix** from the Employers' Group, the group travelled from Caen (France) to Brussels over 4 days, covering a total of around 500 km; they were joined by other EESC members and staff in the final stretch from Waterloo to the EESC headquarters in Brussels. (mp)



[Oscar-winning Ukrainian documentary "20 Days in Mariupol" screened at the EESC](#)

On 24 April, the EESC hosted a screening of the Ukrainian documentary "20 Days in Mariupol" which this year won the Oscar in the category of Best Documentary Feature Film.

The film follows its director, journalist **Mstyslav Chernov**, and his colleagues during 20 dramatic days in February and March 2022, when they documented Russia's brutal siege of Mariupol, a major Ukrainian port on the Azov Sea. Working for the Associated Press, Chernov and his team were the last foreign journalists to stay in the city before it was seized by the Russian army. Their poignant recordings and photos, including those of massive bombardments of a maternity hospital and of the city theatre which served as a shelter for children, travelled the world, bearing witness to the horrors inflicted by the invading Russian army on the Ukrainian civilian population.

Apart from the Academy Award, "20 days in Mariupol" also won many other prestigious awards, including the BAFTA Film Award for the Best Documentary and the Audience Award for the World Cinema – Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival.

The screening was attended by EESC president **Oliver Röpke**, as well as by distinguished guests including H.E. **Vsevolod Chentsov**, Head of the Mission of Ukraine to the EU, and **Yevhen Tuzov**, one of the documentary's main protagonists.

"We must remember our solemn duty to bear witness to history. This movie has a clear message: we have to show the world what hate can do. Let us not forget the sacrifices made by the people of Ukraine, nor the resilience they have shown in the face of adversity. The prospect of Ukraine becoming an EU Member State is not only a testament to our shared values, but also a beacon of hope for a brighter future," said EESC president **Oliver Röpke**.

"20 Days in Mariupol' offers a gruesome but essential look at the suffering caused by Russia's aggression. I am proud to say that our committee has remained unwaveringly at the side of Ukraine, and of its vibrant civil society, in these difficult times, and your presence tonight means a lot," said EESC Vice President for Communication **Laurentiu Plosceanu**.

The EESC has firmly stood by Ukraine and its civil society from the first day of the Russia's war of aggression and reinforced its cooperation with Ukrainian civil society organisations (CSOs) through the EU-Ukraine Civil Society platform. It created the Ukraine hub, offering Ukrainian CSOs in Belgium a working space. It started the Enlargement Candidate Members initiative, to share the EESC expertise with Ukrainian CSOs. A high-level EESC delegation, led by **Mr Röpke**, visited Ukraine in November where it met with Economy Minister **Yuliia Svyrydenko**, representatives of the Verokhna Rada and of civil society. EESC members paid respect to Ukrainian war victims at war memorials in the country.

The screening, organised at the initiative of the EESC Latvian member **Andris Gobiņš**, once again showed the solidarity of Europe's civil society with Ukraine and its people. The audience also had the opportunity to see a photo exhibition dedicated to Mariupol under siege, organised in cooperation with the Ukra-Bel association, which was displayed alongside the main event. (dp)



[‘Before our very eyes’ – a taste of Belgian art at the EESC](#)

If you are interested in Belgian art, make sure to visit the exhibition **[Before our very eyes](#)** in Atrium 6 of the EESC Jacques Delors

building, Rue Belliard 99, before 28 June.

You will be able to enjoy the work of three talented Belgian artists: [Luk Vander Plaetse](#), [Hugues Legros](#) and [Thibault Choquel](#).

Through their photos, the three artists – photographers, graphic artists and designers – show the beauty of the ordinary. *Before our very eyes* ‘whispers a wild and gentle human poetry where different genres and people mingle’.

The exhibition has been organised by the Belgian members of the EESC, supported by a team of coordinators, as part of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, which runs until 1 July 2024. The organisers see the presidency as an opportunity to showcase their country’s know-how and promote Belgian culture within Europe and abroad. (II)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



[The business case for a new ‘big bang’ enlargement and a Union of 36](#)

By Stefano Mallia, president of the Employers' Group in the European Economic and Social Committee

With the wisdom of the past two decades and seven waves of enlargement since the beginning of the European project, it would probably be appropriate to celebrate the anniversary of the ‘big bang’ enlargement of 2004 with facts and figures to dispel emotional debates ahead of the EU elections in June.

The three-year-long war in Ukraine has pushed the issue of enlargement to the forefront of the European geopolitical agenda. The candidate status that was quickly conferred on Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia, as well as the accession negotiations that have finally been opened with North Macedonia and Albania, are positive breakthroughs for a policy which has stalled for years.

To make sure this new momentum stays the course, we should set straight the business case.

Of course, democratisation and the rule of law are untouchable principles, as is the merit-based approach of the enlargement process, which affords no shortcuts. But, at the end of the day, people must be reassured of the potential economic gains and prosperity for the next generation of Europeans.

If the past offers any indication of the future, we can safely say that the business case is indisputable. Trade between old and new Member States grew almost threefold during the formal pre-accession process from 1994 to 2004, and fivefold among the new Member States themselves. The EU-15 of the time grew on average by 4% annually from the start of the accession process to 2008, with the accession process contributing half of this growth, generating 3 million new jobs between 2002 and 2008.

COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have demonstrated that the EU needs to rethink its economic resilience, particularly in the context of the green and digital transitions. REPowerEU envisages a ramping up of European renewable energy production. The Net-Zero Industry Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act call for 40% of green and raw material value chains to be diverted to the EU. EU accession candidates, particularly Ukraine, can play an important role, providing greater economic security.

When it comes to natural resources, Ukraine holds the largest gas reserves in Europe, after Norway. It also produces some of the largest quantities of hydropower in Europe and could increase its production along with other green energy sources such as wind, solar and biomass. Ukraine has also been a major metals exporter and is home to lithium and rare earth deposits, which are crucial for the green and digital industries.

At the same time, Ukraine's agricultural industry is one of the biggest in the world. Its integration into the single market would substantially increase the EU's food security.

The benefits for Western Balkans countries of increased participation in the single market are also crystal clear. As an indication, Croatia's GDP has increased steadily since it joined the EU in 2013, translating into higher incomes for its citizens, with an average increase in per capita GDP of 67% (up from EUR 10 440 in 2013 to more than EUR 17 240).

The road to EU membership for up to nine new countries will be tortuous, but there is no other alternative: if the EU wants to be a global power, it needs to be a local power first.



Others are already deciding for you – time to do something about it?

By the EESC Workers' Group

The European Parliament's campaign 'Use your vote, or others will decide for you' is very apposite. Their election video, delving into the roots of the European project of building up a peaceful future from the ashes of war and genocide, strikes the right chord. Particularly nowadays, with extremism and apathy running amok, politics often seems to be more like a reality show than a true agora.

Do you really want to let others decide for you? They are already doing it and they are opting for austerity - again.

Our president Lucie Studničná [said it loud and clear: we can't afford another austerity crisis](#). The measures undertaken during the last financial crisis left some countries in a limbo of economic decline and brain drain. In Spain, Italy and Greece, unemployment remains high, and GDP per capita is still far away from 2008 levels. In response to this non-solution, we have had a surge of Euroscepticism and populism, enabled by a shift to the far right.

The new fiscal rules will leave most Member States toothless to face the climate and social challenges ahead. The promises of La Hulpe will ring hollow. Citizens will suffer, and the addition of extra economic difficulties, which governments will surely describe as 'imposed from Brussels', could be the last straw for many.

Democracy is not just about voting: civil society and trade unions are fundamental for maintaining its health. And yet, voting is not just a tool of legitimacy, and it is far from useless. It is a right hard-won by the efforts and often the lives of million people across many generations. And we can lose it.

Decisions on austerity are not set in stone. For these elections in June, and for all the national elections coming, we extend the call: use your vote. Don't let it be taken away from you. Vote for social progress. Together, we can continue improving our countries and the European Union, and change what does not work.



[#EUElections2024: Civil society organisations discuss the EU they want and propose priorities for the new term of office](#)

By the Civil Society Organisations' Group

For the new term of office, civil society organisations (CSOs) propose addressing immediate and long-term challenges, properly implementing existing EU policies and strengthening EU values. Structured civil dialogue and a strong social agenda also top the list of their priorities.

On 16 April, the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group held a [conference](#) on *Building Together the EU We Want*. The event brought together national and European-level CSO representatives who discussed their political priorities with a view to the coming [elections to the European Parliament](#) and the signing of the La Hulpe interinstitutional declaration on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Opening the conference, Séamus Boland, president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, deplored the fact that many politicians from mainstream national parties do not want to discuss the EU with voters. Consequently, voters do not understand why the EU is necessary and EU politics do not always reflect what matters to them. This has led to a dangerous disconnect between the general public and the EU and could result in many people voting for extremist parties. 'What is urgently needed now is for national and European politicians to engage with people in an open debate on the problems facing the EU and on what should be done to resolve them. Only like this can we persuade them that the EU is for the many and continues to create opportunities for everyone.'

Read and share the [conclusions and recommendations](#) of the conference, which focus on:

- Why the 2024 elections to the European Parliament matter: the EU at a turning point
- Building together the EU we want: a democratic and inclusive EU of social justice and protection
- Building together the EU we want: a sustainable economy based on fair transitions and quality jobs
- Placing civil society, citizens and youth at the centre of the Europe of tomorrow

The conclusions and recommendations will feed into an **EESC resolution** with policy proposals for the new European Parliament and European Commission, to be adopted in July 2024.

Find out more in the [press release](#) on the conference.

IN FOCUS: 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF GREAT ENLARGEMENT



[Enlargement: the EU's most powerful and successful policy tool](#)

By Pat Cox

Our special guest, former European Parliament President Pat Cox, remembers the big bang enlargement of 20 years ago as a time of outstanding hope when the continent finally drew a full breath on its two lungs: East and West. And while Putin's myth of Slavic brotherhood is being delivered against the backdrop of blasts from ballistic missiles, the EU remains a voluntary union of free and sovereign people, based on the core values of respect for human rights, equality and the rule of law.

The event hosted in Dublin by the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 May 2004 and the welcome ceremony at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 3 May 2004 stand out for me politically but also emotionally as days of outstanding positivity and hope and as symbolic acts of homecoming, of reunification and of the continent drawing a full breath on its two lungs: East and West. In Dublin Seamus Heaney read his poem *Beacons at Bealtaine*, expressing the underlying optimism that this historic enlargement could 'Move lips,

move minds and make new meanings flare'. In Strasbourg the 10 national flags of the new Member States were raised on huge flagpoles made in the shipyards of Gdańsk, a gift from Poland, their journey to Strasbourg a symbolic reminder of the journey from communism to freedom, personified by the presence of Lech Wałęsa.

Of course, for everyone, the event was the culmination of a long and complex process of mutual preparation over many years. There was joy but also relief at reaching the finish line in what was a political and procedural marathon for all involved.

My contention is that enlargement has perhaps been the EU's most powerful, transformative and successful policy tool over the past five decades. My own country, Ireland, joined in the first enlargement on 1 January 1973, the poorest state/region of the then European Economic Community. Access to a large market, together with EU solidarity through regional and later cohesion funds in the early decades of membership, higher standards on gender equality and environmental policy, support for the peace process in Northern Ireland and recognition of the uniquely challenging consequences for Ireland of Brexit, the only EU state sharing a land border with the UK, all combine to yield an especially positive experience and outcome. It was not all plain sailing, particularly during the euro area crisis, but in net terms it has been powerfully positive.

While I both respect and regret the UK's decision to leave the Union, it proves one thing clearly: the EU is a voluntary Union of free and sovereign peoples – free to join, free to leave. What a powerful contrast to Putin's neo-imperial war of choice against Ukraine, where his myth of Slavic brotherhood is being delivered from the barrels of guns, the blasts of ballistic missiles and deadly drones on a daily basis.

The accession of Greece, Portugal and Spain helped to underpin their re-emergence as successful democracies post-dictatorship in addition to bringing improvements in living standards and quality of life.

The big bang enlargement of 20 years ago brought spectacular growth to the new Member States, especially those of central and eastern Europe, through a surge in investment, trade and EU solidarity. On average, their GDP per capita, adjusted for inflation and currency, went from less than half of the EU average to three quarters of a growing EU average over the two decades. Lithuania's GDP per capita trebled in this period. Health has improved, as has education, leading to progress in both quality of life and standard of living. Agricultural output across the region has doubled. In short, as with all previous enlargements, it has proven to be a win-win outcome for the acceding states and the EU alike. This makes me an enlargement optimist, but not a naive one.

Events in Poland in recent years and persistently in Hungary show how a slippage from EU standards in respect of the rule of law, media freedom or respect for minority rights reveals an adhesion to the EU as a vehicle for prosperity but an aversion to the EU as a community of shared values. The Prime Minister of Hungary proudly proclaims his to be an illiberal democracy. Whatever margin of interpretation one might have regarding Article 2 of the TEU, self-evidently it is not a charter for an illiberal democracy. ('The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.')

This was part of the EU membership deal and is written into all accession treaties and was agreed to by all acceding states. The formula 'keep your values but send your money' is not a sustainable basis for mutual respect – something which should not be lost on current candidate states as they seek to navigate their

eventual EU accession. I expect that the Copenhagen criteria will play a more fundamental role in future negotiations, possibly with accession treaty clauses that offer the EU a more robust capacity to defend rights and values from lapses. The EU is not just a market, and material progress, desirable though it is, is not its only or even its essential *raison d'être*.

That said, on the basis of the enlargement record so far, it has been essentially positive for all involved and should be approached in a positive frame of mind. The candidate states will have to undergo significant transformations, each at its own pace. The EU too has homework to do in terms of its decision-making process and budgetary capacity to absorb new member states, and in pre-accession assistance. After candidate state status has been granted and following screening, negotiation frameworks, chapter-by-chapter opening and closing of negotiations and eventual accession treaties all require Council unanimity. None of this is straightforward or easy. One hopes that all Member States will show respect for the duty of 'sincere cooperation' to assist in carrying out the tasks which flow from the Treaty (Article 4(3) TEU).

Ukraine is a case apart in terms of complexity because of its size, the relative share of agriculture to GDP compared to the EU average, and its comparative poverty in terms of GDP per capita, and of course because of the war and its devastating consequences. Negotiations can start. Ukraine is already on the road to integration through its Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU. These could be expanded progressively over time but ultimately a settled territorial outcome and stable peace – in which EU membership can play a role – will be an essential precondition to accession. The EU needs stability, not chaos, on its eastern flank and embracing Ukraine ultimately is in the collective as well as Ukraine's interest.

Pat Cox, former President of the European Parliament from 2002 to 2004

Pat Cox is an Irish politician and journalist. He was the President of the European Parliament from 2002 to 2004, and President of the European Movement International (2005-2011). He has been at the helm of the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe since 2015. He is also a European Coordinator for the Scandinavian-Mediterranean TEN T (transport) Core Network Corridor (EU) and leader of the European Parliament's Needs Assessment and Implementation Mission on Parliamentary Reform of the Verkhovna Rada in Ukraine. In his early career, he worked as a current affairs television broadcaster at RTE in Dublin. In 2004, Mr Cox won the 2004 International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen for his parliamentary commitment to the enlargement of the European Union.



The EU's great enlargement- 20 years on

By Jarosław Pietras

Dr Jarosław Pietras, former Deputy Chief Negotiator for Poland's accession to the EU, reflects on the impact of the enlargement that took place 20 years ago and the economic and other benefits it brought not only to Poland and other countries that joined but to the EU as a whole. The decision to enlarge the European Union in 2004 was a testament to the Union's commitment to unity, diversity and solidarity. Today, there are still valuable lessons to be learned from it for any future pre-accession negotiations.

After 20 years, it is quite clear that the admission of most of the Central European countries, along with Malta and Cyprus, to the EU not only represented a "great enlargement" but was a historic milestone for the entire European Union. The impact was profound, particularly on the economic landscape of the newly admitted nations.

The enlargement significantly boosted the standard of living in Central European countries. The eight Central European countries - Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia - collectively experienced a remarkable increase in their purchasing power parity (PPP) GDP per capita, surpassing what could have been achieved had they remained outside the EU. The statistics always refer to averages about the tangible benefits brought about by integration. It is worth noting that even if the gains were not evenly distributed among the member states, with some experiencing more significant improvements than others, all countries have shown significant improvements. For instance, Lithuania and Poland emerged as front runners, reaping the most substantial benefits from EU membership, while Estonia and Slovenia have made less progress as they faced challenges, especially due to the impact of the 2008 financial crisis.

Accession to the European Union ushered in a new era of economic prosperity for Poland and its Central European counterparts. Poland, in particular, stands out as a success story of post-accession development. The country experienced unprecedented economic growth, with its GDP doubling between 2004 and 2022. Similarly, other member states in the region also witnessed substantial growth in their GDP per capita, albeit at varying rates. Slovakia and Lithuania, for instance, demonstrated commendable progress, further narrowing the development gap with Western Europe. The statistical data from this period paints a picture of resilience and dynamism, as these countries leveraged EU membership to drive economic expansion and enhance their global competitiveness. This remarkable achievement underscores the transformative impact of EU integration on the economies of all new member states. And it happened despite the impact of the financial crisis, during which the new EU members achieved higher growth rates than expected.

The period following the 2004 EU enlargement was not without its challenges. For example, the global financial crisis of 2008 sent shockwaves across the European economy, testing the resilience of both established and newly-integrated member states. Despite the adverse effects of the crisis, the new EU members demonstrated remarkable resilience, outperforming initial growth projections. Their ability to weather the storm and maintain positive growth rates underscored the strength of their economies and the benefits of EU integration. While the crisis posed significant challenges, it also provided an opportunity for these countries to benefit fully from the close link to the European economy. This was also a test of how committed the newly acceded countries were to European values and solidarity in times of adversity.

Throughout the negotiation process Polish civil society emerged as a powerful force for change and progress. Civil society organisations, grassroots movements and advocacy groups played a crucial role in promoting EU integration and upholding democratic values in Poland. Their tireless efforts to raise awareness, mobilise support and hold leaders accountable were instrumental in shaping public opinion and driving positive change. By actively engaging with citizens, fostering dialogue and promoting transparency, Polish civil society helped to ensure that the negotiation process remained inclusive, democratic and responsive to the needs of the people. Their contributions not only facilitated Poland's accession to the EU but also strengthened the foundations of democracy and civil society in the country.

The decision to enlarge the European Union in 2004 was a testament to the union's commitment to unity, diversity and solidarity. By welcoming most Central European countries, along with Malta and Cyprus, into its fold, the EU expanded its economic potential, cultural richness and geopolitical influence. The accession of these countries brought new perspectives, talents and opportunities to the union, enriching its tapestry of diversity and strengthening its global presence. From a geopolitical standpoint, the enlargement enhanced the EU's influence and stability by integrating Central and Eastern European countries into its framework of cooperation and collaboration. Institutionally, it diversified the EU's perspectives and deepened its integration, laying the foundation for a more united and resilient union.

Reflecting on the experiences of the 2004 EU enlargement, there are valuable lessons to be learned, especially regarding the negotiation process and pre-accession preparations. If I were to embark on a similar journey today, I would advocate for putting a stronger emphasis on pre-accession conditions and support mechanisms in all future negotiations, particularly in the areas of governance and the rule of law. It is essential to ensure that candidate countries meet the necessary criteria and standards before joining the EU to safeguard the integrity of the union and uphold its values. Additionally, providing adequate support and assistance to candidate countries during the negotiation process is crucial for their successful integration and long-term stability within the EU.

At the heart of the negotiation process for the 2004 EU enlargement was a shared commitment to fostering stability, democracy and prosperity across Europe. The desire to strengthen the bonds of cooperation and solidarity among European nations guided the negotiations, as both candidate countries and existing EU members recognised the mutual benefits of enlargement. While the negotiations were complex and challenging, they were ultimately driven by a shared vision of a united and prosperous Europe, where all nations could thrive together within the framework of the European Union.

As EU candidate countries navigate the path to accession in 2024, there are several key considerations to keep in mind. Firstly, prioritising reforms that align with EU standards and values is essential for successful integration and long-term stability within the union. This includes strengthening democratic institutions, promoting the rule of law and safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. Additionally, engaging proactively with existing EU members to build trust and support is crucial for a smooth transition into the union. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to European values and cooperation, candidate countries can pave the way for their own brighter future within the European Union.

Jaroslav Pietras is currently Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges.

He worked as part of the team negotiating Poland's accession to the EU from 1998, when the negotiations started, until 2004, when Poland joined the EU. From 1990 to 2006, he served in his native Poland as Secretary of State in the Ministry of Finance, Secretary of State for Europe and Head of the Office of the Committee for European Integration. From 2008 to 2020, he worked as Director General at the Council of the European Union,

covering a broad range of policy areas (climate change, environment, transport, telecoms, energy, education, culture, audio-visual, youth and sport). Holder of a PhD in Economics from the University of Warsaw, he is the author of a number of publications on the EU, sustainability and trade issues. He has also been a Fulbright Foundation scholar and a member of the board of think-tank BRUEGEL (2008-2011).

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