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**REX Work Programme**

*(Activities for 1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025)*

# **MAIN OBJECTIVES AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES**

The general objective of the EESC’s Section for External Relations (REX) is to express the views of organised civil society on issues related to the **EU’s external action** and trade policy.

The REX section aims to promote a favourable framework for the activities of civil society organisations, to establish and improve direct contact with civil society organisations in third countries and to support and strengthen civil and social dialogue in non-EU countries and regions to promote democracy, human rights and the fundamental principles of the rule of law.

This work is increasingly framed by the many international political and economic agreements that the EU concludes with third countries.

The work of the section has changed significantly in recent years. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of supply chains and for civil society to support this process. Russia’s unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine also created a need to provide assistance to Ukrainian civil society and to strengthen links with civil society in the EU’s neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the resurgence of the conflict in the Middle East poses a number of challenges for civil society and calls for a peaceful solution based on international agreements and compliance with international humanitarian law.

In times of increasing geopolitical divides and continuous challenges to the core principles of multilateralism and the rules-based order, the REX section aims to strengthen civil society outreach in partner countries in order to promote high environmental, social and human rights standards and to reach a common understanding on the challenges the world is facing today – climate change, rising violence in many regions and the intensification of autocratic and authoritarian governance structures, growing conflict- and climate-related migration, increasing scarcity of natural resources such as water and critical raw materials, and risks related to digitalisation and health crises. The section pays specific attention to the Global South, which is facing a number of disinformation campaigns and a continuously shrinking space for civil society work and pluralism.

The REX section pays attention to the **priorities established by the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council** in order to ensure that organised civil society can take consistent and supportive action. The REX section also aims to draw the attention of the other institutions to issues identified by civil society as priorities for external policies.

This work programme focuses on 2025 and aims to illustrate the type and number of activities that REX will organise. In geographical and thematic terms, the REX section will prioritise issues related to: 1) **EU enlargement and neighbourhood**; 2) **relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood, with a particular focus on priority areas and like-minded partners**; 3) **international trade and economic security**; and 4**) soft diplomacy and horizontal activities, such as migration, blue diplomacy and climate diplomacy.**

**Through its activities, the section** will continue to channel the ideas and innovative potential of **civil society** into meaningful and effective opinions that can make a valuable contribution to the European decision-making process.

All these activities will be carried out in line with priorities related both to the geopolitical situation and to the impact that the EESC can have. Many of the activities are related to the REX section’s existing 34 bodies and will be designed and implemented by these bodies with the political support of the REX bureau.

**The number of activities that REX is already undertaking, coupled with the large number of existing and still expanding REX structures, puts huge pressure on the human and financial resources available. The REX section therefore needs to focus on priority activities. Setting up new activities that are not included in the current work programme will have to involve analysing the constraints related to the section’s financial and human resources and considering the possibility of disengaging from other activities considered to be low priority.**

# **2. EXPECTED NEW WORK IN PRIORITY AREAS**

This section summarises expected new work in priority areas, highlighting certain key activities. Depending on their nature, some of these activities will be conducted by the relevant REX bodies; others will take place at section level due to their cross-cutting nature, importance, links to legislative work or the absence of a dedicated REX body. The list is not exhaustive and could be modified to reflect new international developments and changes in priorities.

**2.1. EU neighbourhood**

**2.1.1 Enlargement, candidate countries and potential candidate countries**

On 30 October, the European Commission adopted the 2024 Enlargement Package, providing a detailed assessment of the state of play and the progress made by **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-2), Montenegro, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine** on their respective paths towards accession to the European Union.

All of these countries are at different stages in their path towards the European Union, but the process of accession should be closely followed by civil society both in order to ensure that the views of civil society on the reform agenda are heard and also to avoid democratic backsliding.

The EESC will make sure that social partners and civil society organisations play an active role in the implementation of the reform agendas linked to the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans Growth Plan and the Moldova Growth Plan. The EESC is also following the situation in Georgia and the democratic **backsliding** of the country, and will continue communicating with civil society in Georgia and supporting its European aspirations.

The Commission’s 2024 annual report confirmed that **Türkiye** is still a key partner of the European Union. Nonetheless, accession negotiations with the country have been at a standstill since 2018, in line with the decision of the Council. Serious concerns remain in the areas of fundamental rights and rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary.

The EESC will continue engaging with the candidate countries and potential candidate countries through the bodies it has already set up to follow developments in the region – the Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee and the Eastern Neighbourhood Follow-Up Committee – along with the bilateral bodies it has created to follow accession negotiations and association agreements – the EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee, the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, and the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform (provided the political situation in Georgia becomes more favourable). We will hold the inaugural meeting of the newly established EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee in early 2025, and we will re-launch the EU-North Macedonia Joint Consultative Committee provided that the Fundamentals Cluster/first negotiation chapters have been opened with that country.

Should the accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova be opened during the Polish Presidency, the EESC will be given a mandate to set up joint consultative committees with the two partners.

In 2025 the EESC will continue to implement the successful ‘Enlargement Candidate Members’ pilot project, which involves civil society representatives from candidate countries in the drafting of EESC opinions. The REX section will continue coordinating the project and organise the dedicated enlargement plenary session.

The REX section will also take an active part in the reflection on how to better prepare and even reform the EU for future enlargements. The REX section will promote enlargement-related opinions that are adopted by other EESC sections, for example those on issues such as the common agricultural policy, cohesion policy, and the internal market.

Together with the **Ad-hoc group on fundamental rights** **and the rule of law**, the REX section will continue to coordinate visits to a number of EU candidate countries in 2025.

**2.1.2 Other priority countries and regions**

* **The UK**

The EESC deals with EU-UK relations mainly via its EU-UK Follow-Up Committee and the EU DAG for the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which foster relations with UK civil society and monitor key developments on both sides of the Channel that are important for EU-UK relations. In 2025 the REX section will prepare an opinion on the legally scheduled review of the TCA, which is set to take place in 2026.

The review is intended to be limited to an assessment of how the existing provisions are being implemented, but that does not preclude efforts to improve the agreement at a fundamental level. Looking ahead, adopting opinion on this issue will be a unique opportunity to highlight the major challenges faced by business, workers, consumers and citizens and to flag areas where the relationship could be improved. These include regulatory cooperation between the EU and UK, addressing mobility challenges for businesses and citizens, in particular with a view to reinvigorating youth mobility, upholding a level playing field and international commitments, ensuring pragmatic implementation of newly introduced border control regimes, advancing the mutual recognition agenda, fostering greater collaboration on the climate and energy agenda, and addressing the challenges presented by the Windsor Framework.

With the European and UK electoral results and the ensuing new political landscape, in both Brussels and London, momentum is high for recalibrating and rebooting the bilateral relationship, in particular to streamline trading relations, secure an ambitious security pact, smooth out ongoing issues with the rights of citizens and launch closer cooperation in a range of other areas. The voice of organised civil society urgently needs to become part of this debate, and the proposed own-initiative opinion will be our timely contribution, bringing together a forward-looking vision for EU-UK relations.

In 2025, the chair of the EU-UK Follow-Up Committee is expected to represent the EESC at the plenary sessions of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, which take place twice a year.

* **The EEA and the Arctic region**

The Agreement on the European Economic Area brings the 27 EU Member States and the three EEA EFTA states – Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway – together in an internal market. The EEA was established in 1994, and thus celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2024. In 2025 the EEA CC has tentatively planned to meet in Kittilä, in Finnish Lapland, where the European Commission and the EEAS will jointly organise the seventh EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples’ Dialogue. The EESC could contribute to the Forum by holding a side event, which would be structured around the themes that have been covered in the own-initiative opinion *Developing Europe’s strategy for the Arctic in dialogue with civil society*, adopted in January 2025. Moreover, the rapporteur and co-rapporteur will carry out other follow-up activities throughout the year to publicise the EESC’s work on the Arctic.

* **Armenia**

The section will continue to engage with Armenian civil society via the established EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform. The objective will be to enhance debate on technical subjects falling within the scope of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

* **Belarus**

The authoritarian regime in Belarus and the fact that the country has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative have made cooperation with civil society in the country almost impossible, but the EESC will continue to engage with independent Belarusian civil society and media workers in exile, following previous initiatives on disinformation and support to independent media.The upcoming year will be extremely important for Belarus as elections are scheduled in the country, which could result in even more pressure on civil society and opponents of the regime who have remained in the country.

* **EUROMED**

The EU’s Southern Neighbourhood is particularly heavily affected by multiple crises, including the climate and migration crises. In addition, 2025 will most likely continue to be marked by the Gaza crisis and by the armed conflict in Lebanon, with heavy civilian casualties on all sides. As a representative of organised civil society, the EESC will continue expressing its strong solidarity with its counterparts in the region, with full support for their commitment to peaceful, sustainable and democratic development, based on shared values such as human rights. Young people are the hope for a prosperous future for the region, and they will play a key role in the EESC’s activities related to the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood in 2025. Furthermore, the EESC will most likely be consulted on the New Pact for the Mediterranean. This new pact will also constitute an important topic for the 2025 Euromed Summit in Istanbul. In the context of the EUROMED Summit the EESC will also work with partners on the economic transformation in the region through its opinion on *Boosting productive and sustainable growth and quality jobs in Euromed by promoting entrepreneurship and tapping the potential of women and young people*.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

In connection with candidate countries and potential candidate countries:

* Inaugural meeting of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC);
* Inaugural meeting of the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), in Albania;
* 2nd meeting of the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), in Brussels;
* 20th meeting of the EU-Montenegro JCC, in Montenegro;
* 21st meeting of the EU-Montenegro JCC, in the EU;
* 17th meeting of the EU-Serbia JCC, in the EU;
* 18th meeting of the EU-Serbia JCC, in Serbia, + country visit by the Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law;
* 10th EU-Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, in Montenegro;
* 61st Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee meeting (external), in North Macedonia;
* 62nd Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee meeting (internal), in Brussels;
* 63rd Western Balkans Follow-Up Committee meeting (internal), in Brussels;
* ETF/Eurofound/EESC joint event on *Social Dialogue for improved quality of life and work in the Western Balkans*;
* 17th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Ukraine or Brussels;
* 18th meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, in Brussels;
* 15th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform in Chișinău;
* 16th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, in Brussels;
* 13th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Tbilisi (tbc);
* 14th meeting of the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform, in Brussels (tbc);
* Meeting of the Eastern Neighbours Follow-Up Committee;
* Two meetings of the EU-Ukraine Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum;
* Two meetings of the EU-Georgia Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum;
* Two meetings of the EU-Moldova Domestic Advisory Group + Civil Society Forum;
* 43rd meeting of the EU-Türkiye Joint Consultative Committee, in Brussels + preparatory meeting;
* Preparing an opinion on the *Moldova Growth Plan*;
* Preparing an opinion on *The importance of institutionalising civic and social dialogue in EU candidate and partner countries* (tbc);
* Preparing an information report on *Social media and AI tool algorithms and responsibility for the visibility of high-quality, fact-based information on Eastern Europe*.

UK

* Four meetings of the EESC’s UK Follow-Up Committee
* Drafting an own-initiative opinion on *The future of EU;-UK relations: 2026 review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) from a civil society perspective* (tbc);
* Regular contact with civil society organisations in the devolved nations.

Euromed

* Euromed Summit 2025;
* Own-initiative opinion, *topic* *tbc*;
* Two Euromed Follow-Up Committee meetings;
* One Euromed Summit preparatory meeting, including an informal meeting of the Euromed Follow-Up Committee;
* Exploratory mission to Mauritania;
* EU-Morocco JAG meeting;
* Participating in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean;
* Co-organising and participating in the Brussels Civil Society Forum (MAJALAT);
* Preparing an opinion on *Boosting productive and sustainable growth and quality jobs in Euromed by promoting entrepreneurship and tapping the potential of women and young people* (tbc);
* Preparing an opinion on *A New Pact for the Mediterranean* (tbc).

EEA + the EU’s Arctic policy

* 35th meeting of the European Economic Area Consultative Committee, in Kittilä, Finland (tbc);
* Participating in the EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples’ Dialogue in Kittilä, Finland, and other follow-up to REX/592;
* Arctic-related side event with civil society stakeholders (tbc).

Armenia

* 6th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Yerevan;
* 7th meeting of the EU-Armenia civil society platform, in Brussels.

Belarus

* Meeting of the Eastern Neighbours Follow-Up Committee devoted to Belarus.

**2.2. Relations with civil society beyond the EU neighbourhood**

2.2.1 ACP and Africa

The Samoa Agreement was signed in November 2023 and entered into provisional application in January 2024. Article 95 of the agreement clearly provides for the establishment of a stakeholder engagement mechanism through which civil society would be closely consulted in the implementation of the agreement. However, to date, no real progress has been made in setting up such a consultation mechanism.

As the ACP-EU Follow-Up Committee is based on the predecessor to the Samoa Agreement, the Cotonou Agreement, uncertainties persist regarding that committee’s role under the new agreement, and the financing of ACP delegates’ participation remains on hold.

The EESC and our Follow-Up Committee will continue to press for the EESC’s role to continue to be recognised under the new agreement, based on the proposals put forward in 2024.

Despite this situation, the Follow-Up Committee intends to pursue the activities launched in recent years and will increasingly focus on cooperation with the African Union’s Economic, Social and Cultural Council (AU ECOSOCC), in the context of the Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2024 in Accra (Ghana). One important milestone in this cooperation will be the EU-AU Summit planned to take place in 2025.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Pursuing cooperation with the European Commission and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) on the implementation of Article 95 of the Samoa Agreement;
* Participating in meetings of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) (including regional assemblies where relevant, in particular the EU-Africa Assembly) and strengthening cooperation with the JPA, in particular as regards civil society events in the margins of the JPA;
* Implementing the Memorandum of Understanding with the AU ECOSOCC and updating the Memorandum of Understanding with the Union of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions of Africa (UCESA);
* Continuing work to ensure that civil society is involved in the implementation of economic partnership agreements (EPAs), in particular the EU-Ivory Coast EPA (following the 2022 mission and exchanges with the Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council of Côte d'Ivoire) and the EU-SADC EPA (following the study conducted in 2023-2024);
* Supporting the implementation of the EU-Kenya EPA by helping set up Domestic Advisory Groups;
* Continuing work on the Indo-Pacific region, including in the context of the development of an EU-Pacific civil society body based on the architecture of the Samoa Agreement;
* Organising two CARIFORUM-EU Consultative Committee meetings.

Regarding the implementation of the MoU with the African Union ECOSOCC, the following activities will be considered:

* Continuing work on the civil society engagement mechanism for the EU-Africa Partnership, based on the joint proposal put forward by the EESC and AU ECOSOCC;
* Collaboration in the context of the OACPS-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly and Africa-EU Regional Assembly;
* Contributing to the drafting of a common position by EU-Africa organised civil society with a view to the EU-Africa ministerial meeting and summit to be held in 2025;
* Exchanging information and cooperating in the drafting of opinions on issues of common interest to the EESC and ECOSOCC. The opinion on legal pathways to the EU seems relevant in this context;
* Topics on which cooperation could be envisaged include migration and mobility, financing for development, sustainable development and democracy, climate change, SDGs, women’s empowerment and employment, and civil society empowerment. A roadmap listing relevant activities on these topics is currently being drawn up with the AU ECOSOCC.

**2.2.2 Latin America (LA)**

The objective for 2025 is to maintain our presence on **various EU-LA bilateral and regional fora.** Over the past two years REX’s contact and activities with LA partners have been very dynamic and have been visibly intensifying (examples from 2023 include EU-CELAC, EU-Central America DAGs, EU-Andean DAGs, EuroLat, EU-Chile JCC and the Bogota labour conference, and as of 2024, a clear additional priority was expressed with two EESC high-level missions to **Brazil**).

On the bilateral side, the results of the elections held on 19 November 2023 in **Argentina** brought uncertainty about the future of Argentinian democracy, concerns about the role of civil society and questions about available formats for our bilateral relations. However, despite this political unpredictability, there is once again hope that we will be able to conclude the long-awaited FTA with Mercosur, in particular following Ursula von der Leyen’s announcement on 6 December 2024 that political agreement had been reached on the subject.

REX has been watching the 2024 presidential election in **Mexico** closely and is following the work to update the bilateral Global Agreement.

The modernised EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement (AFA) is expected to enter into force in early 2025. This will create an obligation on both sides to create Domestic Consultative Groups within the next two years.

**Brazil** has been raising its international profile as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2022-23, chair of G20 until late 2024 and chair of Mercosur (until early December 2023). The REX section has stepped up bilateral relations with the country’s recently re-established Sustainable Economic and Social Development Council (CDESS). In line with the bilateral MoU signed in Brasília in April 2024, the EESC has revived the EU-Brazil Round Table. The ambition for 2025 is to hold at least one meeting of the new joint structure.

The **main areas of interest** to be further explored in our relations with LA partners include investment (the EU is the main partner in the region), reindustrialisation, trade (including in the raw materials and rare earths needed to boost the green energy transition), sustainable development, including environmental protection (the region accounts for 50% of the world’s biodiversity), the digital alliance and combating climate change through decarbonisation (with fair access to green technologies), and fighting inequalities and empowering women, young people and vulnerable populations. Last but not least, LA and the EU share many common values and interests, so our exchanges should reaffirm our commitment to a multilateral rules-based order, democracy, human rights and fair and free trade.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Two meetings of the EU-Latin America Follow-up Committee;
* Participation of a REX delegation in the meeting of the EuroLat Joint Parliamentary Assembly;
* Joint meeting of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee;
* Meeting of the EU-Brazil Round Table in Brussels
* High-level mission to Brazil by an EESC delegation (EU-Brazil Round Table) headed by the EESC President;
* Exploratory mission to Argentina and Uruguay to strengthen inter-institutional relations with the Consultative Economic and Social Forum of MERCOSUR (tbc).

**2.2.3 Russia and Central Asia**

While relations have been broken off with the official representation of civil society because of its support for the regime and the war against Ukraine, it is important to remain in con with Russian civil society in exile, which opposes the war and the regime and is in continuous contact with the remaining free civil society organisations in the country. Meetings with them will continue according to the current arrangements, which provide for the regular presence of free Russian civil society at the EESC both to present their problems and requests to the EU institutions, and to participate in our meetings and provide valuable contacts and speakers for various EESC initiatives (conferences against disinformation, participation in section meetings and events, etc.). Following the successful completion of three conferences against disinformation (in Bulgaria, Moldova and Greece), a new one could be envisaged, either in Latin America according to the original project or in a new EU country.

With the extension of the EU-Russia Follow-up Committee’ remit to include Central Asia, the plan is to step up existing relations with Central Asian countries. An own-initiative opinion on the situation of civil society in Kazakhstan will be discussed at the January plenary session, after which discussions will be held on how to continue contact with Kazakh civil society. An activity concerning Kyrgyzstan and/or Uzbekistan will also be considered, for example a dedicated discussion during the REX section meeting, or a half-day seminar in Brussels. Contact has already been made with the embassies of all five Central Asian countries, allowing us to make initial acquaintances, especially with Kazakhstan. To this end, maximum visibility will be given to the own-initiative opinion, among other things by resuming the previous exchanges of views with the new Parliament and the new Commission.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Two meetings of the EU-Russia and Central Asia Follow-up Committee;
* A conference against disinformation, with a dedicated campaign;
* Completing the own-initiative opinion on the state of civil society in Kazakhstan;
* A REX section meeting on Central Asia.

**2.2.5 Transatlantic relations**

The Transatlantic Follow-Up Committee will continue monitoring relations with the US and Canada and developing relations with civil society. The change of US administration will bring specific challenges, in particular in relation to transatlantic trade relations. The current situation regarding transatlantic links is further complicated by the recent resignation of the Canadian government and upcoming elections in Canada.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Mission to the US (tbc);
* Two meetings of the Transatlantic Follow-Up Committee, in Brussels.

**2.2.6. Japan and South-East Asia**

Due to various geopolitical tensions, the EU is looking to develop closer relations with the ASEAN countries. Therefore, the remit of the EU-Japan Follow-Up Committee has been extended to include Southeast Asia.

Following the extension of its remit, the EU-Japan and South East Asia Follow-Up Committee will not only dedicate its work to Japan but also identify EU key interests in the South East Asia region. This will include keeping an eye on the state of play in the ongoing trade negotiations with ASEAN countries and seeking to get an overview of civil society in the countries in the region, in particular countries with which the EU is negotiating free trade agreements that provide for the establishment of domestic advisory groups. The main focus of the Follow-Up Committee will, however, still be Japan, building further on information received and contact established during its mission to Japan in October 2023.

The Follow-Up Committee will also start reflecting on drafting an information report and/or organising an event focused on Japan or the region in 2025.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED for 2025**

* Two meetings of the EU-Japan and South East Asia Follow-up Committee;
* Preparing information report on *The situation of civil society organisations in the ASEAN countries*.

**2.2.7 China**

The EU-China Round Table met in Beijing in December 2024, after a long break. There is now a firm intention to continue organising regular meetings of the EU-China Round Table. The 20th round table meeting should be held in Europe.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Meeting of the EU-China Round Table + preparatory meeting.

**2.3. International trade**

2024 has been a year of political change on both sides of the Atlantic. Globally, the same trends that emerged or accelerated in 2022-2023 developed further.

The EU continued its work on the FTA negotiations agenda. While the EU-Mercosur FTA is approaching a potential conclusion, environmental and competition issues still need resolution. The EU-Chile Association Agreement was successfully updated to become the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement, aiming to provide greater access to raw materials and clean fuels. The EU also signed the EU-Angola Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreement, the first sustainable investment facilitation agreement between the EU and a third country.

The focus continued to shift towards strategic autonomy and resilience, particularly in the context of global supply chains and strategic sectors for the green and digital transitions. The EU also implemented significant trade defence measures. The Commission proposed a revision of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Screening Regulation to strengthen the assessment of foreign investment in critical sectors like energy, technology, and infrastructure. The Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) came into force, providing the EU with a framework to respond to economic coercion by third countries. The EU imposed additional tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles due to concerns over unfair subsidies and market distortions, Additionally, the export control regime for dual-use goods and technologies was updated to prevent the proliferation of sensitive technologies, aligning its measures with international non-proliferation standards to protect global security.

Unilateral trade-related measures gained traction, with the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) entering its operational phase. Meanwhile, the implementation timeline for the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) was extended to 2025 and 2026, following international feedback on its potential impact on smallholder farmers, among others. The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) entered into force.

At multilateral level, the WTO’s 13th ministerial conference (MC13) did not repeat the success of MC12 and showed further entrenchment of opposing political positions, impeding advancement on key files. Amid growing uncertainties, the WTO and its members are trying to lay the groundwork for a more fruitful MC14 (early 2026). In this context, 2025 will be a crucial year for EU trade policy and more, with the new leaderships in Brussels and Washington displaying their first political directions and impacts. The REX section will convey and coordinate the views of civil society in all of the above-mentioned areas, with a focus on consistency and a cross-sectoral approach. The section will keep pursuing improved communication on international trade and its implications, and will call for further involvement from civil society with regard to EU policy-making and ongoing negotiations, including at WTO level.

Monitoring by civil society of the negotiation, implementation and enforcement of trade agreements will remain a key focus area. The section will continue to monitor EU bilateral and regional trade negotiations, and their ratification processes. The REX secretariat will continue to provide administrative and policy support to the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs) addressing horizontal challenges and cross-cutting topics through an improved All DAGs coordination structure.

The successful experience of the TSD Civil Society Forum will be further built on and improved based on lessons learned from the first three editions.

The section will also follow the WTO’s work and reform process, focusing on the road to MC14 (February 2026), and actively contribute to working sessions and bilateral meetings at the annual WTO Public Forum (September 2025).

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Fourth Civil Society Forum on Trade and Sustainable Development;
* Three meetings of the EESC International Trade Follow-Up Committee;
* Annual mission to Geneva;
* Participating in the WTO Public Forum (September 2025);
* Two to four meetings per EU DAG, with related DAG-to-DAG meetings and joint workshops (in total +/- 50 meetings for the 12 DAGs currently active – Cariforum-EU Consultative Committee, EU DAG for Korea FTA, EU DAG for EU-Central America FTA, EU DAG for the EU FTA with Columbia, Peru and Ecuador, EU DAG for EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic Agreement, EU DAG for FTA with Japan, EU DAG for FTA with Vietnam, EU DAG for FTA with Singapore, EU DAG for the Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine, EU DAG for the DCFTA with Moldova, EU DAG for the DCFTA with Georgia, EU DAG for the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the UK – + EU-Chile DAG, EU-New Zealand DAG and EU-Kenya DAG expected to be established in 2025);
* One All DAGs meeting and ad hoc meetings of All DAG presidencies;
* Cooperating with WTO secretariat on exploring ways to make civil society involvement at WTO level more effective;
* Cooperating with UNCTAD and ILO to build on the contacts from 2023/2024;
* Drafting an opinion on the trade aspects of the Draghi report;
* Drafting an opinion on fragmentation of supply chains and the impact on the cost of living.

**2.4. Soft diplomacy and horizontal activities**

The main benefit of relations between civil society in the EU and third countries is the promotion of EU values through **soft diplomacy**. The REX section is already doing this in its various meetings with civil society representatives from third countries.

In recent years, the European Commission and the EEAS decided to put a specific emphasis on various kinds of soft diplomacy, such as **economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, climate diplomacy, health diplomacy**, **digital diplomacy**, etc. The EESC is a natural partner of the other institutions in the field of soft diplomacy, due to its experience and its network of civil society contacts. There is therefore a need to strengthen and improve the work done by REX in these fields as well as its cooperation with relevant international organisations and UN bodies. In terms of horizontal diplomacy the section will also work on disability and diplomacy and on taking better account of disability-related issues in the external relations field.

Following its opinions on the **Global Gateway**, the REX section also aims to actively participate in the Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform, organised by the European Commission and other civil society networks working on the global gateway.

Following its opinion on ***Strengthening multilateralism*** *and core international principles for a rules-based order in a rapidly changing world – The importance of the civil society contribution to the UN system*, the EESC is strengthening its relations with the UN-system organisations and focusing on the organisation of common events on issues of shared interest.

Cooperation with Economic and Social Councils in partner countries will also be continued through the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding with AICESIS (International Association of Economic and Social Councils), and ongoing cooperation with the Union of African Economic and Social Councils, the Africa Union ECOSOC and the Consultative Economic and Social Forum of MERCOSUR.

**Disinformation:**

In 2023, the EESC launched a project aimed at involving civil society in the fight against **Russian disinformation and foreign interference**. The project comprised a series of three conferences, accompanied by targeted awareness-raising campaigns on social media, to be held in EU Member States and candidate countries; the venues were Sofia, Bulgaria (June 2023), Chișinău, Moldova (April 2024), and Athens, Greece (November 2024). The original project provided for the possibility of a similar conference outside Europe, for example in a Latin American country with an ECOSOC (Brazil?), if the three conferences in Europe were a success. The evaluation of the first two events was very positive, and the third will be evaluated soon.

**Blue diplomacy:**

Following the **EESC’s call for a Blue Deal**, it is important to follow up on the EESC opinion on ***Blue diplomacy*** and to explore avenues for the practical application of blue diplomacy and water-related solutions as instruments of peace and prosperity in the global regions most exposed to water stress. Cooperation with relevant civil society organisations will also be developed in this respect.

**Migration:**

Migration will remain at the top of the EU agenda. Migratory pressure on the EU is likely to intensify as a consequence of the situation in the Middle East, as well as other ongoing conflicts. The phenomenon of climate-related migration is also intensifying and there is no legal framework for such migration in the EU. The REX section will closely follow the issue of migration together with the SOC section.

**ACTIVITIES SCHEDULED FOR 2025:**

* Continuation of the EESC's project on disinformation (tbc);
* Drafting an opinion on *Addressing the interdependence between peace and climate change: need for renewed global diplomacy*
* Water Conference in Sofia, organised by REX and CCMI (tbc);
* Participating in World Water Week in Stockholm (August 2025) (tbc);
* Drafting an information report on diplomacy and disability (tbc);
* Participating in the meetings of the Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform and other relevant meetings;
* Organisation of an EESC-FAO joint event on SDGs and voluntary national reviews together with the NAT section;
* Mission to the UN in Geneva;
* Drawing up a feasibility study to generate statistics on climate-induced migration.

1. This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)