C/2026/67

30.1.2026

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Strengthening European values in candidate countries by supporting the public service sector and empowering social partners and civil society organisations

(exploratory opinion requested by the Danish Presidency)

(C/2026/67)

Rapporteur-general: **Kristina AALTONEN**

Advisor	Lorenzo TAMBURRINI
Plenary Assembly decision	25.2.2025
Legal basis	Rule 47(1) of the Rules of Procedure
Referral	7.2.2025, Letter from the Danish presidency of EU Council
Legal basis	Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	External Relations
Adopted in section	9.9.2025
Adopted at plenary session	23.10.2025
Plenary session No	600
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	211/0/3

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) emphasises the crucial role that social partners and civil society organisations in candidate countries and EU Member States play in the process of EU enlargement. Their active involvement is essential in supporting candidate countries' transition towards the universal fundamental values of the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU): democracy, human rights, labour rights, and the rule of law.

1.2. The EESC recommends to the European Commission, in the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and other relevant contexts:

— that social partners from candidate countries be invited as observers to both cross-sectoral and sectoral EU-level social dialogue structures, with their participation funded by the Commission. This would enable early exposure to EU practices and support learning;

— that EU programmes and funding instruments should be strategically targeted to strengthen the social partners and civil society organisations in candidate countries, including social and civil dialogue;

— prioritising promoting, and financing partnerships and peer learning initiatives between social partners and civil society organisations from EU Member States and candidate countries to promote mutual exchange and capacity-building;

— that the Youth Guarantee, Growth Plans and the Reform Agenda be used as vehicles to strengthen social dialogue;

— that synergies be actively sought with other actors, in particular the International Labour Organization, in order to ensure coherence, avoid duplication of efforts and reinforce the impact of EU support for social dialogue and capacity-building in candidate countries.

1.3. The EESC underlines that:

— the social partners representing employers and employees, especially those in public services, should be recognised as key agents in promoting public trust, democratic institutions and effective social dialogue;

— cooperation between public authorities and civil society should be strengthened and institutionalised as part of the accession preparations;

— following the approach of the EESC, the first EU body to apply gradual accession principles and involve EU candidate countries in its work by appointing 'enlargement candidate members', other EU bodies and institutions should also follow this good practice;

— candidate countries should be encouraged to include social partners and relevant civil society organisations in their monitoring committees in order to improve the implementation, coordination and monitoring of the process, while ensuring that representativeness is regularly assessed.

2. **General remarks**

2.1. The accession process is guided by the accession criteria (also known as the Copenhagen criteria) and grounded in the *acquis communautaire*. Candidate countries are expected to demonstrate that they have put in place legal frameworks and stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities.

2.2. This expectation is reinforced by international instruments and standards, including core International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions on freedom of association (No 87) ([1]), the right to collective bargaining (No 98) ([2]) and tripartite consultations (No 144) ([3]). These conventions establish the importance of recognising social partners and ensuring structured dialogue in national policy processes.

2.3. EU enlargement is not merely a political and institutional process; it is fundamentally a value-based one. Candidate countries are required to align with the universal UN and EU's core values and principles. This alignment must go beyond formal legislation to include strong democratic institutions, robust civic participation and social and civil dialogue at all levels.

2.4. The war in Ukraine has brought renewed attention to the strategic importance of EU enlargement as a geopolitical necessity. It is essential that neighbouring countries align with a democratic, rules-based global and European order, grounded in international law, multilateralism, and the principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

2.5. The EESC encourages the European Commission and other institutions to identify and promote best practices from past and current candidate countries, including:

— how public service employers and trade unions have constructively supported reform processes and institution-building;

— how cooperation between civil society and public administration has advanced transparency, anti-corruption efforts and public accountability;

— how social and civil dialogue mechanisms have contributed to the defence of fundamental rights and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

([1]) ILO Convention 87: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise.
([2]) ILO Convention 98: Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.
([3]) ILO Convention 144: Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards).

2.6. The EESC urge the Commission to address evident attempts to suppress the civic space and independent media, and to reflect these issues more prominently in the enlargement strategy and country reports. The inclusion of all EU candidate and potential candidate countries in the rule of law and fundamental rights reports would be welcome.

3. **Supporting social partners and civil society organisations**

3.1. The EESC refers to its previous opinions on the rule of law and democratic values, in which the importance of meaningful involvement of civil society is emphasised ([4]), and reasserts the key role played by civil society organisations in democracy ([5]). The EESC stresses civil society's key role in ensuring transparency and accountability in EU rule of law reporting process, urging their engagement throughout all stages to enhance democratic legitimacy and accuracy. The EESC highlights civil society's vital democratic role in amplifying citizens' voices and protecting rights, urging increased EU support through funding, safeguards, and reduced burdens to strengthen their impact and resilience.

3.2. The EESC also refers to its previous opinions on social dialogue, on civil dialogue and participatory democracy and on youth involvement in social and civil dialogue ([6]). The EESC emphasizes the importance of robust social dialogue in shaping fair economic and social policies. It calls for stronger collective bargaining, meaningful tripartite engagement, and support for national-level frameworks. Transparent institutionalised structures for participation and consultation should be established and implemented. It calls for a stronger EU civil dialogue strategy, including an action plan, annual scoreboard, and citizen panels, to enhance participatory democracy and implement Article 11 TEU effectively. It stresses the need for meaningful youth participation in social and civil dialogue and calls for inclusive policymaking, structural involvement, and support for vulnerable youth groups. The EESC also reiterates the importance of embedding civil and social dialogue in candidate countries through a comprehensive legislative framework.

3.3. Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) provide effective platforms for fostering mutual learning, civil dialogue and pilot cooperation. They have an important role in following EU accession negotiations and fostering institutional dialogue with EU bodies.

3.4. The EESC urges the EU institutions to adopt a strategic and inclusive approach to future enlargements. A free and autonomous civil society is essential to protecting democracy, particularly in safeguarding core rights and freedoms and countering the rise of populism. Organised civil society act in the public's interest through democratic means and can bridge the gap between government institutions and ordinary citizens. They provide a space where people can express their concerns, advocate for their rights, and participate in non-violent civic engagement. Grounded in shared values, civil society reflects the voices of diverse communities, including those who are most vulnerable.

3.5. The EESC calls for existing EU instruments, such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III), to be used more effectively to support democratic actors in candidate countries, including mechanisms like regranting to reach all areas and vulnerable groups.

([4]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Evaluation of the European Commission's annual reports on the rule of law in the European Union (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/1184, 21.3.2025, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/1184/oj).

([5]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2023/861, 8.12.2023, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/861/oj).

([6]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the proposal for a Council Recommendation on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union (COM(2023) 38 final – 2023/0012 (NLE)) and on the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union: harnessing its full potential for managing fair transitions (COM(2023) 40 final) (OJ C 228, 29.6.2023, p. 87); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (exploratory opinion requested by the Belgian Presidency) (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Youth involvement in social and civil dialogue in the Mediterranean region (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/1189, 21.3.2025, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/1189/oj); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – The importance of institutionalising civil and social dialogue in EU candidate and partner countries (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/5152, 28.10.2025, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/5152/oj).

3.6. This also includes targeted support for social partners, including in the public services, and civil society organisations, and the development of capacity-building programmes that promote universal and European values through partnership, dialogue and civic engagement.

3.7. The EESC recommends prioritising in the next MFF funding for platforms that facilitate transnational cooperation between social partners and civil society organisations in EU Member States and candidate countries. These partnerships can foster knowledge exchange, mutual support and shared commitment to European values. One good example is sustainable urban mobility network CIVINET Slovenia-Croatia-Southeast Europe ([7]).

4. **The public services as a foundation for democracy and trust**

4.1. The process of aligning candidate countries with shared democratic principles and EU values requires broad societal engagement. Public sector employers and workers, working closely with civil society, are not merely implementers, they are transformative agents in shaping, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies. Their active and structured involvement can ensure that democratic norms, human rights and the rule of law are effectively embedded in institutions and everyday life.

4.2. In this context, the EESC emphasises that a well-functioning and rights-based public sector, underpinned by committed and competent employers and workers, is critical to embedding these values in practice. Transparent institutionalised structures for participation and consultation should be established and implemented.

4.3. Transparent, professional and accountable public services are vital for building and maintaining citizens' trust in political and administrative institutions. It is through these institutions that key elements of democratic life – access to justice, equal treatment, service delivery – are implemented and experienced by the population.

4.4. Through structured social dialogue, employers' organisations and trade unions contribute to the promotion of decent working conditions, inclusive governance, respect for labour rights and the rule of law. Their role in shaping and delivering public services supports the transition to the fundamental values of the European Union.

4.5. At the same time, cooperation between public authorities and civil society organisations is fundamental to ensure openness, civic participation and accountability in governance. This collaboration should be actively supported and institutionalised as a permanent tool for fostering democratic resilience and social cohesion in candidate countries.

4.6. Special attention should be given to the collaboration between the public sector of candidate and EU Members states, including joint projects, training and peer learning that build democratic capacity and administrative professionalism.

4.7. The EESC emphasises that education systems are a cornerstone of democratic resilience and a crucial vehicle for promoting the rule of law, fundamental rights and inclusive citizenship. Teachers are key agents in this process. In many eastern neighbouring countries, particularly those with post-Soviet legacies, a significant proportion of educators were initially trained under centralised, authoritarian pedagogical models. These systems often lacked emphasis on critical thinking, pluralism or democratic participation. In light of this, the EESC calls on the Commission and national authorities to give high priority within both current and future IPA programmes, to the continuous professional development of teachers, with a focus on civic education, democratic values and human rights. This aligns with the specific objectives of the Regulation on the IPA ([8]), which include fostering democratic governance and respect for fundamental rights, as well as promoting inclusive education and employment, particularly for young people. The EESC calls for Erasmus+ and other relevant EU programmes to be used to achieve these objectives when appropriate.

([7]) https://civinet-slohr.eu/hr/english/.

([8]) Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III) (OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1).

4.8. The EESC also stresses importance of non-formal education which empowers citizens, civil society and public institutions by building skills, fostering democratic values, and enhancing civic participation. It promotes inclusive dialogue, strengthens social cohesion, and supports transparent governance – key pillars in the EU accession process.

4.9. The EESC stresses the need to safeguard and promote teachers' professional autonomy, including pedagogical freedom and institutional independence. Autonomy is a prerequisite for enabling teachers to foster open dialogue, critical thinking and rights awareness in the classroom. The EESC urges the Commission to actively support reforms that guarantee academic freedom and professional autonomy, protect educators from reprisals, and ensure the meaningful involvement of teaching professionals in education policy development. Teachers' professional autonomy is essential to building democratic culture and institutional trust.

Brussels, 23 October 2025.

The President

of the European Economic and Social Committee

Séamus BOLAND