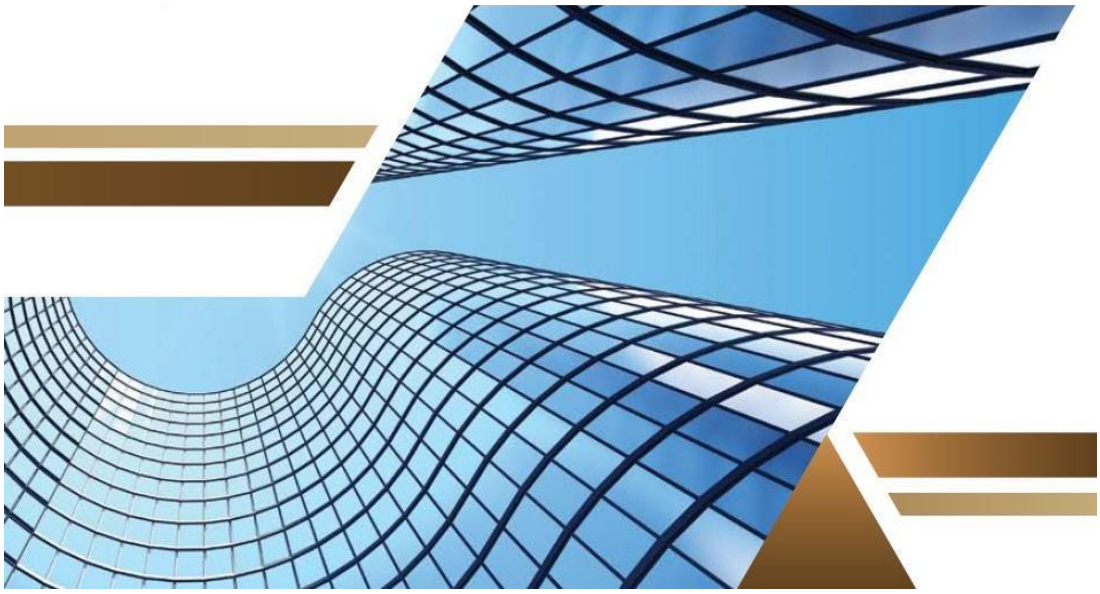
Republic of Bulgaria
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



ANNUAL ACTIVITY REPORT

OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

FOR 2024

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This document has been drawn up pursuant to Article 23 of the Economic and Social Council (ESC) Act and the ESC Rules of Procedure, and presents the main activities of the ESC in 2024. The activities carried out and reported by the Council are in line with the ESC Action Plan 2024, the approved budget and the policy of expediency in spending adopted by the management within the parameters set out in the Plan.

I. REFLECTION OF THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES IN THE ACTS DRAWN UP

The Economic and Social Council (ESC) has established itself as an independent civic institution expressing the will of organised civil society, which advises the President of the Republic, the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers on key economic and social issues for Bulgaria and Europe.

In pursuit of its mission, the ESC has defined its strategic priorities, which adequately reflect and focus on overcoming the main challenges facing Bulgarian society:

- The European Green Deal and the sustainable development of Bulgaria;
- Technological transformation and digitalisation of the economy and society;
- The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) – the European Action Plan for the EPSR and its projection onto Bulgaria's first national plan.

The ESC Action Plan 2024 includes acts that are in line with these strategic priorities. Thematically, they cover at least one, and often several, of them.

In 2024, too, the ESC reaffirmed its commitment to representing the diverse interests of Bulgarian citizens, while at the same time demonstrating the will of all members of the Council to contribute to the better economic and social development of Bulgaria.

II. ACTS OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL DRAWN UP AND ADOPTED IN 2024

In 2024, the ESC drew up and adopted 12 analyses, 6 opinions, 5 resolutions and 2 declarations on topical economic and social issues.

1. Acts of the Economic and Social Council proposed by the National Assembly, the President of the Republic and the Council of Ministers

Pursuant to Article 5(1) of the Economic and Social Council Act, during the reporting period the ESC received six proposals for drawing up acts from the National Assembly, the President of the Republic and the Council of Ministers (CoM). In addition, by Council of Ministers Decree No 333 of 1 October 2024 amending and supplementing Council of Ministers Decree No 480 of 2022 on ensuring the process of technical preparation for the introduction of the euro in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as the communication activities, the Council of Ministers tasked the Economic and Social Council with organising a campaign comprising a series of events to support public awareness of the topic.

1.1. Acts drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria:

- **"Updated Analysis of the Demographic and Socio-economic Development of the Planning Regions – Results and Current State", drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria (Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024), adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(1), in conjunction with Article 4(1), point 5, of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024 the President of the Republic of Bulgaria proposed that the Economic and Social Council draw up an "Updated Analysis of the Demographic and Socio-economic Development of the Planning Regions – Results and Current State".

The analysis builds on the analysis of problems relating to the State's economic and social policy, drawn up in 2022 at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria and entitled "The Demographic and Socio-economic State of the Planning Regions – Current Situation and Development Prospects"; on the basis of up-to-date data on the socio-economic development of the planning regions, it identifies development trends, analyses the policies and measures that have been applied and their effects, and defines recommendations for eliminating or reducing disparities at regional level. In keeping with the functional nature of the ESC as a consultative body bringing together representatives of employers, trade unions and the non-governmental sector, the ESC presents joint consensus proposals and recommendations.

The ESC analysis finds that the demographic and socio-economic state of the planning regions in Bulgaria is a function of multiple factors and processes. Despite the measures taken over the last decade, the existing disparities and most of the negative trends are increasing, deepening the divergence and differences between the planning regions. The interrelationship between economic development and social and demographic processes is evident. Overcoming the negative trends and disparities within and between the planning regions requires a set of measures, including: (1) adopting a package of sustainable, long-term, systemic, interlinked, simultaneously applied and socially acceptable measures to slow down negative demographic trends and to offset the impact of demographic change on economic and social life, with a focus on the birth rate, the labour market, the pension and social security system, long-term care, education, healthcare, the territorial distribution of the population, and the maintenance and development of administrative capacity to implement a horizontal, integrated demographic policy; (2) organising a broad-based public debate on: the role, importance and potential of well-planned urbanisation for sustainable social development and economic growth, encompassing the large urban centres, smaller towns and suburban areas, and villages; the need to consolidate the administrative-territorial units and the regions for statistical comparison under the Common Classification of Territorial Units

for Statistics (NUTS); and the development of a new Strategy for the polycentric economic, regional and social development of Bulgaria, for an even distribution of economic resources across the country, and for improving and bringing closer together the quality of life in towns and villages.

➢ **"Analysis of Inequalities in Education and Their Impact on the Labour Market in Bulgaria. Solutions for Readjusting the Education System towards the Applicability of Knowledge and the Development of Social Skills" (BG), drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria (Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024), adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(1), in conjunction with Article 4(1), point 5, of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024 the President of the Republic of Bulgaria proposed that the Economic and Social Council draw up an "Analysis of Inequalities in Education and Their Impact on the Labour Market in Bulgaria. Solutions for Readjusting the Education System towards the Applicability of Knowledge and the Development of Social Skills" (BG).

According to the analysis, educational inequalities are found in Bulgaria which are due both to income inequalities and to other factors. The members of the ESC acknowledge the considerable efforts made and the real measures taken to overcome, to a significant extent, the effects of such inequalities, especially within compulsory basic education.

The analysis notes progress on a number of indicators of inclusion in education over a ten-year period in Bulgaria. It highlights the positive role of the changes made in 2016 and 2022 to the state requirements for acquiring the professional qualification of "teacher", and of the changes to the age of kindergarten attendance, which were supported by the social partners.

At the same time, the analysis notes that obligations under international commitments to provide quality and accessible education (including under the UN

Sustainable Development Goals) have not been fully met, and that action to implement the relevant national programming documents in this area must continue.

The analysis outlines problem areas in which no progress has been recorded and in which efforts must be made to overcome them, such as the share of children in pre-school education and adult learning.

The analysis concludes that many of the problems in Bulgarian education, which are generally often treated as inequalities or as the result of inequalities (above all income inequalities), are in fact the result of cultural differences between the attitude towards education of society as a whole and that of certain social groups that are marginalised or on the verge of social exclusion.

The analysis outlines the need for policies for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, in the context of developing the existing measures to support them, based on a multi-institutional approach.

- **"Analysis of the Expected Effects of Artificial Intelligence on the Labour Market in Bulgaria. Proposals for Concrete Measures to Overcome the Problems", drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria (Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024), adopted at the Plenary Session on 04.10.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(1), in conjunction with Article 4(1), point 5, of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter Ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024 the President of the Republic of Bulgaria proposed that the Economic and Social Council draw up an "Analysis of the Expected Effects of Artificial Intelligence on the Labour Market in Bulgaria. Proposals for Concrete Measures to Overcome the Problems".

Over the past six years, the ESC has been examining the challenges, trends, transformation and development of digitalisation in Bulgaria and drawing up its own acts on these important issues.

The analysis concludes that Bulgaria is not yet among the leaders in the European Union in terms of the uptake and use of artificial intelligence (AI) in all spheres, but that the country has the potential to become a significant player in the field of AI.

In the analysis, the representatives of organised civil society noted that the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence will require serious organisational efforts. The Regulation requires the adoption of primary and secondary legislation, as well as the establishment of new state regulatory bodies and of units of experts with specialised knowledge at employers operating in high-risk areas (within the meaning of the Regulation).

In the analysis, the ESC proposes that the said legislative acts be drawn up in close cooperation with the social partners (at sectoral and national level) and with the relevant sector of civil society. It stresses that the implementation of the Regulation will have a serious impact on employers, as well as on those working in these areas.

The analysis expresses concern that the existing mechanisms and tools for monitoring developments in industrial relations and the labour market are unable to adequately capture AI-related changes so that the necessary action can be initiated and implemented in a timely manner.

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges that AI creates new opportunities and is transforming jobs, occupations and the workforce. Workers who are ready to learn and adapt will be best placed to take advantage of these opportunities. The State should play an active role in education and training for the acquisition and development of AI-related digital skills.

1.2. Acts drawn up at the proposal of the Council of Ministers:

- **"Analysis of the Possibilities for Simplifying and Speeding up the Procedures for Bringing in Workers and Highly Qualified Personnel from Third Countries for the Needs of Bulgarian Business", drawn up at the proposal of the Council of Ministers (Council of Ministers Decision No 923/21.12.2023), adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.04.2024.**

The ESC analysis finds that one of the challenges to the development of enterprises and to attracting investment, not only in Bulgaria but also in the EU, is the

persistent labour shortage. The act focuses on a topic of exceptional importance for our country and analyses the causes of the labour shortage in Bulgaria – economic as well as demographic – and draws attention to the workforce deficit caused by internal migration processes.

The analysis highlights the following key points:

- A detailed analysis is made of the dynamics and the current situation in the country regarding access to the labour market;
- State policy in the field of labour migration is examined;
- Special attention is paid to the basic legislative framework of the national legislation in force on the employment of foreigners who are third-country nationals: the Labour Migration and Labour Mobility Act, the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for their implementation, and the Asylum and Refugees Act;
- Agreements with third countries in the field of labour migration are examined;
- The actions being taken to simplify and speed up the procedures for bringing in workers and highly qualified personnel from third countries for the needs of Bulgarian business are described.

As a result of the analysis, the ESC: stresses the need to strengthen the role of the National Council for Labour Migration and Labour Mobility (NCLMLM) as a social dialogue body on key issues relating to the implementation of the regime for access of third-country nationals to the Bulgarian labour market, when taking decisions on updating the legislation in this area, as well as in connection with the agreements regulating labour migration; identifies the main challenges for business relating to the procedures for access of third-country nationals to the labour market; and draws up recommendations for simplifying and speeding up the procedures for bringing in workers and highly qualified personnel from third countries for the needs of Bulgarian business.

1.3. Acts drawn up at the proposal of the Chair of the 49th National Assembly:

➢ **"Analysis of the Causes, Factors and Trends for the Formation and Scope of the Group of So-called 'Working Poor', Recommendations and Proposals for Legislative Changes to Limit This Phenomenon", drawn up at the proposal of the 49th National Assembly (letter No АД-49-350-06-235/28.08.2023), adopted at the Plenary Session on 23.02.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(1) of the ESC Act, the Chair of the 49th National Assembly (outgoing No АД-49-350-06-235/28.08.2023) proposed that the Economic and Social Council draw up an "Analysis of the Causes, Factors and Trends for the Formation and Scope of the Group of So-called 'Working Poor'".

The analysis presents the consensus view of organised civil society on the topic, identifies the main challenges facing the workforce and the Bulgarian economy, and focuses on recommendations aimed at improving the legislative framework.

The conceptual framework for overcoming the "working poor" syndrome should be implemented in compliance with one fundamental principle – that human dignity is directly and inseparably linked to work (and, in this sense, European and Bulgarian legislation regulate in detail the framework for performing work) – so as to eliminate precarious work, poor working conditions and pay below the subsistence minimum. Decent pay should be considered together with the economic parameters of individual achievement and social progress, with the nature and conditions of work, and with the consumer, living and social standards objectively prevailing in the country.

The analysis sets out to examine the extent to which certain characteristic features that can be described as generating and aggravating the "working poor" phenomenon are present in the country.

In the conclusions of the analysis, the ESC points out that the main factor is the low level of income in certain regions, economic sectors and positions, relative to education, length of service and qualifications, and the state of the labour market, and, accordingly, the disproportionate increase in the prices of basic goods and services compared with income compensation.

The ESC stresses that having a job does not in itself help people escape the poverty trap. Over the last 10 years, rising employment levels have been observed, but there has been no reduction in poverty levels among those in work. On the other hand, the general trend for Europe does not match that in Bulgaria – there, rising employment leads to a reduction in the number of working poor. This means that the distribution of income among employed persons as a whole can be explained by their individual characteristics and the specificities of labour markets, as well as by other factors. Thus, poverty among them may occur not only when they are in temporary or part-time employment, but also in the case of permanent full-time contracts.

In the analysis, the ESC recommends a review of the implementation of the objectives set, and of the approaches and policies applied, that are directly relevant to reducing poverty – employment and income policy, the tax and social security burden, education, healthcare, the provision of quality and accessible social services, ensuring the sustainability and adequacy of social benefits, maternity, childcare, access to the labour market for people with disabilities, housing and regional policy, etc. A regional view of poverty also reveals significant differences, which should be taken into account both in identifying the factors generating poverty and in pursuing policies to overcome it. The multi-sectoral and social policies pursued so far have not produced the desired result in terms of achieving the targets set for reducing poverty.

➢ **"Analysis of the Current Pension System and Proposals for Its Improvement", drawn up at the proposal of the 49th National Assembly (letter No АД-49-350-06-235/28.08.2023), adopted at the Plenary Session on 13.12.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(1), in conjunction with Article 4(1), point 5, of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter No АД-49-350-06-235 of 28.08.2023 the Chair of the 49th National Assembly proposed that the Economic and Social Council draw up an "Analysis of the Current Pension System and Proposals for Its Improvement".

The analysis examines in detail the existing pension system in Bulgaria. With the 2000 reform, Bulgaria successfully enriched the architecture of its pension insurance system by introducing a three-pillar pension model comprising mandatory pension insurance based on the principle of solidarity, and supplementary mandatory and supplementary voluntary pension insurance in funded schemes based on the "defined contribution" principle, with the funds of insured persons accumulated in individual accounts. The international institutions that provided financial and technical assistance for implementing the reform, namely the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have expressed great satisfaction with its results. Greater fairness has been introduced into the state pension schemes, and long-term preconditions have been created for improving the living standards of insured persons and pensioners.

The analysis presents the key elements that over the years have ensured the sustainability of the reformed pension system – ensuring a smooth transition to the new legislation while guaranteeing previously accrued rights; preserving the core protective role of the solidarity-based first pillar; modernising regulation, including the introduction of new, fairer rules; and introducing a modern legal framework for the new supplementary funded forms, providing for: the legal autonomy of pension funds and of the companies managing them, subject to strict rules on their functioning and responsibilities; representation of the interests of insured persons through so-called trustee boards (in supplementary mandatory pension insurance funds) and advisory boards (in voluntary pension funds); and supervision and control by the State. A single national revenue administration has also been established, which collects social security contributions and monitors compliance with the social security obligations of insurers and insured persons. The document also discusses the role of the funded forms of insurance that have been created, which complement the solidarity-based first pillar through individually capitalised pension schemes, in which future payments are determined by the funds accumulated in the accounts and the investment income allocated to them.

On the basis of its in-depth analysis of the system, and stressing that the existing three-pillar pension model in Bulgaria is the result of a hard-won consensus among all stakeholders, and that ensuring a balanced interaction

between its elements is the most reliable solution to the current problems and challenges facing the Bulgarian pension system, the ESC sets out recommendations and possible solutions for its improvement and development. The ESC considers that improving the pension model must be established as a long-term priority of pension policy, and that the proposed solutions must be implemented in partnership with the social partners, the structures of organised civil society and other stakeholders.

2. Own-initiative acts on issues of economic and social policy

➢ **Resolution "National Just Transition Plan – a Key Instrument for Achieving the Transition to a Climate-Neutral Economy" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.**

In implementation of the priorities set for its term of office, the ESC included in its Action Plan for 2024 the drawing up and adoption of the Resolution "National Just Transition Plan – a Key Instrument for Achieving the Transition to a Climate-Neutral Economy" (BG). Through this act, the ESC notes with concern that the state institutions in the country are not prepared to meet the challenges of the green transition amid the rapidly unfolding processes of phasing out coal mining and coal-fired electricity generation. The same negative processes are also observed in industry, with a significant decline in industrial production, which will inevitably lead to shocks on the labour market. Through the Resolution, the ESC aims once again to call on the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria to draw up a National Just Transition Plan, the ultimate objective of which is to ensure a smooth transformation of the economy towards achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

The ESC stresses that it is crucial for the green transition and the transition to a circular economy to become a common political goal, as the transition affects everyone. To be successful, the transitions need concerted efforts and must be planned and structured in a way that addresses job losses, the shortage of decent work, inequality, and sectoral and educational mismatches. Policies must be

consistent and balanced and must address the link between climate change, decent work and sustainable development. The ESC is of the view that the high speed at which the legislative initiatives of the European Green Deal are developing calls for an in-depth assessment of the socio-economic and environmental impact of the transition, which requires planning with a short-, medium- and long-term vision for the development of the economic sectors and regions that will be affected by the low-carbon development of the economy.

The ESC once again stresses the need for policies and measures to be agreed with representatives of organised civil society and all stakeholders.

- **"Analysis of the Interaction between Civil Society Organisations and National and Local Institutions in Response to and in Times of Crisis" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.**

The analysis examines the state of interaction between civil society and national and local institutions in response to disasters and crises, with a view to laying the foundations for a broad debate and public processes that would encourage and support the sustainable participation of civil society organisations as partners of the State in crisis situations.

The analysis examines the strategic framework for the interaction of civil society organisations with state institutions and provides a detailed retrospective of the legislative framework governing this interaction. The legislative framework governing the interaction between civil society organisations and institutions includes international law and standards, the European Union legislative framework, and the applicable national legislative framework and institutional environment in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The recommendations in the analysis may serve to raise awareness of the role of civil society organisations in preventive activities for risk reduction, as well as in coping with disasters and crises and achieving a sustainable recovery from their consequences; to support the development of adequate policies, measures and instruments by the institutions and organisations concerned to improve the conditions for promoting and

optimising the role of civil society organisations and citizens in response to disasters and crises; to analyse and take measures to create functioning mechanisms for financial support to civil society and national and local institutions during disasters and crises; and to activate and promote volunteering and the involvement of citizens in disasters and crises.

➢ **"Analysis of Directive (EU) 2023/970 of 10 May 2023 to Strengthen the Application of the Principle of Equal Pay for Equal Work or Work of Equal Value between Men and Women through Pay Transparency and Enforcement Mechanisms" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.**

In the analysis, the ESC examines the process of transposing Directive 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

Transposition of the Directive must be completed by 07.06.2026 (Article 34). This is a relatively short period of time in which legislative amendments of considerable scope and effect must be clarified, discussed and prepared – some of them with the potential to set different interests against each other, and without precedent in legislation and practice – and must also go through the statutory procedures for their adoption, including by the National Assembly.

The main objective of the analysis is to support the effective transposition of the Directive by setting out its content and substance and by drawing attention to those provisions that have no equivalent in our national legislation.

The analysis discusses potential problem areas in the transposition of the Directive and proposes possible solutions.

➢ **Analysis "European Requirements and Perspectives for a Cyber-Resilient Bulgaria" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.04.2024.**

The analysis points out that information and communication technologies are a key factor in the economic growth of the Member States of the European Union and a vital resource for national economies. At the same time, through this act the ESC draws attention to the challenges facing citizens and society as a whole, including:

- intentional and unintentional cyber threats behind which stand criminally, economically and politically motivated, as well as state-sponsored, individuals and organisations;
- the threat of cyberattacks in cyberspace targeting the public sector as well as the private sector and individual citizens;
- economic espionage sponsored by individual states, which in turn also poses a serious threat to the countries of the European area.

The document examines the current legal framework on the subject and draws key conclusions and recommendations that may be of use to the institutions concerned, such as:

- drafting an Act amending and supplementing the Cybersecurity Act;
- taking measures to draw up a National Strategy that is aligned with the requirements laid down in Regulation (EU) 2022/2554 and that should logically precede the drafting of the Act amending and supplementing the Cybersecurity Act;
- achieving compliance with the requirements of Directive (EU) 2022/2555 (NIS 2), Regulation (EU) 2019/881 and Regulation (EU) 2021/887 for Member States to ensure that the relevant cybersecurity authorities are provided with the necessary technical, administrative and financial resources;
- optimising the activities of the Cybersecurity Council so that it can effectively exercise its powers and functions, and establishing and operating a control mechanism at all levels of the cybersecurity system with regard to the extent and quality of the obligations performed in accordance with the requirements of the legislation.

The analysis also examines legislative initiatives at European level, such as the NIS 2 Directive (the Network and Information Security Directive 2) on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the EU, which is the

first part of the pan-European legislation on cybersecurity. The Directive aims to achieve a high common level of cybersecurity across the Member States of the European Union by setting a baseline for cybersecurity risk-management measures and reporting obligations in all sectors covered by the Directive, such as energy, transport, health and digital infrastructure.

The Directive seeks to eliminate the differences in cybersecurity requirements and in the implementation of cybersecurity measures between Member States by laying down minimum rules and mechanisms for a regulatory framework and mechanisms for effective cooperation between the relevant authorities in each Member State.

➢ **Resolution "Bulgaria's accession to the euro area" (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

The resolution is the latest in a series of documents prepared by the Economic and Social Council examining the process of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area. The document is a natural continuation of ESC acts drawn up in 2017 and 2022. In addition, in October 2023 the ESC prepared a "Resolution of the ESC on Bulgaria's membership of the euro area". All of this demonstrates consistency in the Council's work and its commitment to the process of full membership of the Economic and Monetary Union.

The ESC's acts on the subject set out the Council's position as the only independent body providing Bulgarian society with an objective analysis of the impact of introducing the single European currency on incomes, inflation and economic development.

In its resolution, the ESC once again highlights the fact that the social partners are among the most active participants in the process of informing the public about the benefits and challenges of euro area membership. In this connection, a series of discussion forums, conferences and information meetings were also organised.

➢ **Opinion "The European Semester in Bulgaria – challenges and opportunities" (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

The opinion calls for the institutionalisation, by law, of the role of the ESC as the body expressing the will of civil society structures on economic and social development in the preparation and updating of the National Reform Programme, through an obligation to submit an annual opinion on the NRP before its approval and submission to the European Commission.

The opinion discusses the significance of the European Semester by introducing its basic concepts, stages and processes. The European Semester is the European Union's framework for the coordination and monitoring of economic and social policies. First introduced in 2010, it has gradually evolved and expanded with new initiatives and policies monitored by the European Commission within the Semester, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, including the REPowerEU chapters, as well as the latest in the series of documents, published in March 2024 – the action plan to tackle labour and skills shortages.

Following the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the adoption of the European Action Plan for its implementation, the Semester was also assigned the role of a key instrument for monitoring the achievement of ambitious targets under all 20 principles of the Pillar.

The ESC opinion pays particular attention to the low degree of compliance with important provisions in the recitals of the annual reports and of implementation of the country-specific recommendations addressed to Bulgaria, drawing on official data that form part of the European Commission's monitoring process. Over 70 per cent of the recommendations addressed to Bulgaria in the period 2019–2022 have seen some or limited progress, including in the areas of the labour market, education and skills, poverty, social inclusion and social protection, focusing investment (public and private) on the green and digital transition, and digitalisation of the public sector. These data eloquently point to a formalistic approach or to difficulties in formulating and implementing adequate policies capable of changing the current situation in a sustainable manner. Nevertheless, the data in the social

indicators table of the 2023 Country Report on Bulgaria show noticeable progress in the employment and unemployment indicators, but this needs to be analysed in the light of the specific features of Bulgaria's demographic dynamics, set out in the 2021 ESC opinion "The European Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights".

In this regard, the ESC opinion stresses the importance of genuine efforts to implement measures and policies in response to the recommendations addressed to Bulgaria, so that the country can achieve upward economic and social convergence and secure the conditions for economic growth, a marked improvement in the educational and health profile of the population, a reduction in poverty and inequalities and an overall increase in the well-being of the nation.

➢ **"Analysis of the working conditions and opportunities for coal-fired power plants in the transformation of coal regions towards low-carbon energy", adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

The aim of the analysis is to show that the European electricity market model is geared mainly towards supporting the financing of renewable energy projects, while at the same time recommending the simplification of administrative procedures and environmental assessments and the widespread use of long-term purchase agreements for the energy produced from these sources.

The analysis informs the institutions concerned and civil society that the development of new electricity projects cannot be sustainable unless agreement is reached on the framework for the just transformation of the coal regions. This agreement has a social dimension and is a criterion for approving funding under specific European programmes or for taking investment decisions on private projects.

The analysis expresses concern that the short deadlines given for reviewing and discussing the draft updated NECP with the social partners before its submission to the EC run counter to good practice in social partnership.

These policies are expected to generate interest from private investors in developing low-emission sources, mainly photovoltaic and wind power

plants, while energy efficiency measures remain a commitment of consumers, who can be supported by targeted national and European programmes.

The analysis makes recommendations concerning:

- the need to build on policies supporting low-emission generation capacity by linking them to broader industrial and transport policies;
- the need to create new value chains in the European Union (EU) that deploy the latest technological solutions, digitalisation and the circular economy;
- building on energy efficiency measures with demand-side management for end customers;
- reaching zero emissions by 2050;
- the need to secure baseload and balancing capacity, which should be a national priority, as well as to draw up an optimal strategy for financing projects for a new pumped-storage hydroelectric power plant (PSHPP) and new nuclear capacity in the country.

It is stressed that, given the key importance of coal-fired power plants for the Bulgarian energy sector, it is necessary to ensure the viability of existing energy assets in critical infrastructure and to apply coordinated measures to overcome the social consequences of the transformation. It is extremely important to note that energy development and transformation should take into account and support the development of the coal regions, making use of every opportunity to this end.

➢ **"Analysis of ILO Convention No 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining" (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

The analysis underlines the need to ratify ILO Convention No 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining, a need also reflected in the ESC's previous acts:

- "Analysis of the current state of wages in Bulgaria – conclusions and recommendations", adopted in 2022;
- Opinion "Approaches to drawing up an action plan to promote collective bargaining in Bulgaria", adopted in 2023.

The analysis notes that in Bulgaria there is a historical legacy in the development of the social partners' attitude towards the ILO Convention and the promotion of collective bargaining, and that expectations have formed regarding its ratification, which have also been highlighted in previous ESC acts.

The analysis points out that in June 2020, as a result of tripartite negotiations, a National Tripartite Agreement was concluded, in whose Section IV "Demography, education, labour market and labour migration", point 10, the State and the representative organisations of workers and employers committed to:

a) ratification of ILO Convention 154; and

b) launching a process for the ratification of Convention 151 concerning the right to organise and procedures for determining conditions of employment in the public service.

The main conclusion is that, as a result of the ratification of ILO Convention No 154, the State may take promotional measures with regard to collective bargaining as a whole and, in particular, by encouraging the social partners to negotiate on:

- the parties to the negotiations and agreements;
- the procedural and formal rules relating to negotiations and the conclusion of collective agreements;
- the subject matter of collective agreements and their conclusion and implementation;
- collective labour disputes arising and their settlement by the parties in a manner that meets the Convention's requirement to promote collective bargaining.

Taking such measures will certainly develop, enrich and stabilise collective bargaining and agreements, and make them more effective and socially beneficial, not only as a final and mutually beneficial outcome but also as a procedure for strengthening trust and cooperation between the parties involved.

➢ **Opinion "Strategic planning in Bulgaria – challenges and opportunities for a green and digital transition", adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

The opinion focuses on national strategic planning as a core function of the legislative and executive branches, which is a complex, multifaceted and dynamic process with numerous impacts and of key importance for the structuring and long-term development of the economy and society. The aim of the opinion is to show that the accelerated green and digital transition, as well as the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, represent a significant challenge for the development of the economy and society, requiring a radical rethink of strategic planning in Bulgaria.

National strategic planning should be based on a clearly defined legal framework and on a functioning mechanism for resolving the fundamental problems of the economy, society and the State, taking into account national specificities and the prospects for accelerated and catch-up economic and social development.

In the document, the ESC draws attention with concern to the fact that Bulgaria is missing its chance to turn the green and digital transition into an opportunity for economic growth. The opinion highlights the importance of strategic planning for managing the green and digital transformation, especially in the context of the EU Strategic Agenda 2024–2029, and notes the political calls for a "recalibration" of the European Green Deal. The ESC considers that Bulgaria can make up for missed opportunities and achieve more ambitious national targets through which the country's economy can be transformed in line with the new realities, by building a coherent strategic framework and making use of the capacity of the social partners and non-governmental organisations.

According to the ESC, timely changes are needed to the legislation governing national strategic planning, as well as the launch of measures to build the missing capacity in the responsible institutions, including through the adoption of a Strategic Planning Act. It is recommended that an in-depth review be carried out of the coordinating structures and advisory councils operating at national level.

➢ **Resolution on the updated Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (BG), drawn up by the President's Council and, following written approval by the members of the ESC, submitted within the deadline (26.06.2024) to the public consultation on the NECP.**

The ESC actively defends the position of organised civil society in the process of drawing up and implementing strategic documents directly aimed at implementing climate policies and decarbonisation, including the NECP, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, REPowerEU and the Territorial Just Transition Plans. In its opinions, the ESC puts forward specific proposals for measures in the areas of low-carbon economic development, the development of a competitive and secure energy sector, reducing dependence on imports of fuels and energy, and guaranteeing energy at affordable prices for all consumers. In its 2023 resolution, the ESC recommended that the updated version of the Integrated Energy and Climate Plan be adopted after public consensus has been reached on the reforms set out in the NRRP, which would ensure forecasting of the development of the country's energy sector over the next 10 years, with maximum use of local resources and the application of instruments against high market volatility, as well as the creation of a favourable environment for investment in the sector.

The ESC regards the updated version of the NECP as a document of high socio-economic importance for the country, since it sets out the higher targets established by the European Green Deal and the European Climate Law, the "Fit for 55" package and REPowerEU, and these targets will be transposed into legislative acts, which will substantially change the country's economic framework.

The document has a long-term impact, as it sets the national targets for the five dimensions of the plan up to 2030: decarbonisation, energy efficiency, energy security, the internal energy market, and research, innovation and competitiveness. The ESC points out that the targets set are extremely ambitious and that achieving them requires finding a balance between maintaining security of supply and the transition to a low-emission economy. The ESC draws attention to the fact that linking a wide range of measures necessary for the country's economic development to specific steps for accelerated decarbonisation of the energy sector confronts Bulgaria's economy with a number of challenges.

The ESC recommends that, in its decarbonisation strategy, Bulgaria adhere to the scenario without additional policies and measures, as such a scenario corresponds to the current financial capacity of the population and businesses and takes account of the announced opportunities for European support.

The ESC recalls that investments and reforms must be implemented in compliance with the principles of cooperation and partnership, and insists on the creation of joint mechanisms for monitoring progress in implementing the planned measures.

The ESC recommends deepening partnership and cooperation between the State administration, the private sector and organised civil society, and setting up thematic working groups for the programming, discussion and joint drafting of national legislation as a guarantee of the transparency, quality and stability of regulatory documents.

- **Analysis "The free electricity market: problems and challenges for household and non-household consumers, measures to improve energy efficiency", adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.07.2024.**

The act is fully in line with one of the priorities of the Economic and Social Council's term of office: "The European Green Deal and the sustainable development of Bulgaria".

The aim of the analysis is to show that, during the period of liberalisation of the household electricity market, the risks faced by household consumers relate to a loss of well-being or falling into energy poverty owing to rising and volatile electricity prices.

The analysis emphasises the fact that the increase in household spending on electricity will limit households' financial capacity to purchase other goods, which will also have a negative impact on businesses owing to reduced demand for other goods on the domestic market.

In addition to the limited ability of end customers to pay, non-household consumers will be forced to increase their production costs, since extending

liberalisation to household consumers will increase demand for electricity on the exchange.

The document examines the role of the Energy and Water Regulatory Commission and highlights the fact that the EWRC currently sets household prices, but this market is expected to be liberalised, with all household consumers entering it. Of particular importance for all consumers will be price formation on the wholesale and retail markets, as well as the regulation of electricity prices and the effects of electricity market liberalisation on inflation.

The document sets out measures to improve energy efficiency, including measures aimed at developing the legislation on energy efficiency; it draws attention to the need to identify households in energy poverty and to assess the energy efficiency measures currently applied and energy-poor households. Extending the scope of energy efficiency measures and of support for households in energy poverty can be achieved through:

- the policy of supporting vulnerable households with targeted heating allowances during the winter season;
- continuing the policy of renovating multi-family and single-family buildings through the instruments of the NPEEMRB, the NRRP and the operational programmes, including the "Regions in Growth" Operational Programme (OPRG), with the mandatory introduction of a differentiated approach under which households in energy poverty receive 100% grant funding, while an appropriate percentage of co-financing applies to other households;
- developing differentiated incentives for investment in energy-efficient heating systems;
- including individuals and households in local energy communities for the construction of RES installations;
- funds from the Social Climate Fund to tackle energy poverty.

➢ **Opinion "Accelerating the development of the social economy in Bulgaria in response to contemporary challenges", adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.07.2024.**

The opinion sets out the ESC's position on the importance of the social and solidarity economy for Bulgaria, both in terms of the country's economic development and in terms of solving important social problems, including by harnessing civic energy and business initiative.

The topic of the opinion coincides with the ESC's third strategic priority, "European Pillar of Social Rights". Policies enshrined in the principles of the Pillar include the inclusion of people with disabilities and social protection. In line with the ESC Action Plan for 2024, the opinion examines the institutionalisation of the social and solidarity economy sector as a leading priority at European and national level in recent years.

The subject of the opinion is highly topical, since the social and solidarity economy offers concrete and innovative solutions to major challenges that States have to address in the context of persistent and mutually reinforcing economic crises. The social and solidarity economy contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular: reducing and eradicating poverty, and ensuring decent work and the economic development of States. It fosters fair and sustainable economic and industrial development of States, as well as economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union. For Bulgaria, the development of the sector is of the utmost importance in the context of addressing the main socio-economic problems, relating above all to job creation, high levels of poverty, social exclusion and income inequality, as well as achieving the objectives of the green and digital transition.

➢ **Resolution of the ESC on Bulgaria's accession to the OECD (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024.**

The ESC firmly supports the goal of Bulgaria becoming a full member of the OECD by the end of 2025, a deadline set at the meeting of the Council of the international organisation in May 2024. The ESC's position is based on the historically confirmed premise that accession to the OECD:

- stimulates economic growth by increasing trade between countries, leading to higher profits for businesses, higher incomes for workers and economic stability;
- raises the living standards of the citizens of the country concerned, including by maintaining stable employment over time, higher wages and improved social security;
- improves fiscal stability through tax transparency policies, reducing tax evasion, improving the efficiency of tax collection and creating the conditions for pursuing policies for real convergence.

The ESC considers that full membership of the OECD, which also involves the application of the inclusive frameworks, recommendations and other types of documents adhered to by the organisation, will have a positive impact on all areas of governance of the State and will accelerate its socio-economic development.

➢ **Declaration of the ESC on the Bill on the registration of foreign agents (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024.**

The declaration expresses the ESC's firm position against the bill on the registration of foreign agents tabled in the 50th National Assembly. The ESC, which through its member organisations represents the interests of over 3 million employed persons and a significant part of the rest of society, called on the political parties and all democratic organisations to distance themselves from the bill and to guarantee that Bulgaria will continue to be a State governed by the rule of law and a social State, developing genuine democracy in which citizens and businesses participate freely in public and State affairs.

The declaration stresses that the Council considers that the bill attacks the fundamental democratic values in Bulgaria by restricting the constitutional rights of the individual

and the free development of the person and of civil society. The application of such a law would lead to the de facto blocking of the activities of institutions.

➢ **Opinion "Problems and challenges for the competitiveness of Bulgarian agricultural producers" (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 20.11.2024.**

This is the latest document on the subject of agriculture adopted by the Economic and Social Council during the current term of office.

The aim of the opinion is to show: 1) the problems and challenges faced by Bulgarian agricultural producers in the context of national and European policies; 2) the factors affecting the competitiveness of agricultural producers; 3) what the subsidies and financial support for Bulgarian agriculture are, compared with those of the other newly acceded EU Member States and of farms in the old EU Member States; 4) the conditions under which Bulgarian farmers have to compete with producers from other EU Member States, where subsidies and financial support are considerably greater.

The opinion focuses on problems related to climate change, which is having an increasingly serious impact on the competitiveness of agricultural producers in Bulgaria, and the related increased need for irrigation, and recommends that irrigation be designated a national strategic priority and that urgent measures be taken to improve irrigated agriculture, including the restoration of the land reclamation sector.

The ESC also notes other challenges, such as the lack of specific legislation on agricultural cooperatives, which limits their development; labour shortages as one of the main problems in the agricultural sector in Bulgaria; land fragmentation, inefficient legal and administrative processes, short-term lease agreements and the lack of land consolidation; weaknesses in insurance in the Bulgarian agricultural sector, which has great potential but remains underdeveloped owing to high costs, insufficient State support and low trust in insurance

companies; and the need to attract and retain labour through State incentives and long-term employment programmes, as well as to facilitate the recruitment of workers from third countries, among others.

In order to achieve economic sustainability and stability of agricultural holdings, as well as to improve competitiveness and the environment for carrying out agricultural activity in the country, the ESC recommends simplifying administrative procedures and reducing regulatory regimes in agriculture. It also recommends a package of tax relief; encouraging young farmers and women farmers to enter agriculture; adapting and stimulating agricultural science in the conditions of a market economy; developing and promoting practically applicable and business-oriented scientific innovation in agriculture; applying public-private partnership in research; adapting financial instruments to the specific features of the agricultural sector; promoting the role of farmers in society and highlighting the importance of farmers for ensuring food security, employment and rural development, as well as their contribution to environmental protection.

➢ **Resolution of the ESC on the Bill on the registration of foreign agents (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 20.11.2024.**

In its resolution, the ESC expresses serious concern about the proposed law on the registration of foreign agents, submitted to the registry of the 51st National Assembly on 11 November 2024, as well as about similar bills tabled in the three previous National Assemblies. The resolution builds on the ESC Declaration of 11.09.2024.

As a consultative body of civil society, the ESC is categorical that:

- The draft is contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria.
- The bill has not been drawn up in accordance with the principles of the Statutory Instruments Act.

- There is no public need for a special or extraordinary approach to regulation that would justify the bill.

In the resolution, the Economic and Social Council concludes that the proposed bill on the registration of foreign agents is unfounded and contrary to Bulgarian legislation and international legal standards. There are no clear and substantiated reasons for introducing the new regulations, nor has there been sufficient public consultation to involve civil society in the process. Existing laws already provide adequate control over the funding of organisations, making the new requirements unnecessary and duplicative. The bill violates key constitutional rights such as freedom of association, freedom of expression and the protection of private life, and runs counter to the principle of proportionality. From an international perspective, the draft violates fundamental rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and international UN standards. The case law of the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights confirms that such restrictions are unlawful and discriminatory.

The ESC stresses that the introduction of the bill is aimed at tightening control over organisations that inform the public and participate in shaping public opinion, and constitutes an unjustified restriction of the right to freedom of expression. This is contrary to the constitutionally guaranteed rights to the free dissemination of information and a gross violation of media independence and freedom of expression, and an attempt at political interference in the work of the media. The introduction of penalty regimes for organisations with foreign links and funding will discourage international investment and cooperation, especially in sectors that are key to the country's innovation and economic development.

Should this bill be adopted for whatever opportunistic reasons, the ESC insists that the entities entitled to do so refer it to the Constitutional Court to establish its unconstitutionality.

➢ **Opinion "Planning regions in the Republic of Bulgaria" (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 13.12.2024.**

The opinion expresses the need for an urgent change to Bulgaria's regional division at the level of the classification of territorial units for statistics, in order to create conditions for promoting the regional development of the country and to ensure real access to European funds for all citizens, business and non-profit organisations.

The disproportionately high level of prosperity of Sofia City compared with the national average artificially raises the prosperity of the entire region, including by lowering the intensity of grant aid. This causes serious economic lagging behind of the districts in this region located outside Sofia City. They rank among the last in terms of GDP per capita measured in purchasing power standards. The opinion points to the distortion arising from the aggregated statistical data for the districts of Pernik, Kyustendil, Sofia District and Blagoevgrad, combined with Sofia City under the current regional division, which deprives enterprises and their workers of the funding received by enterprises from municipalities with entirely similar indicators but located in other planning regions, and specifies that "any other region combined with Sofia City would find itself in a similarly disadvantaged position".

The designation of the South-West region as a "transition region" is the reason for the reduction in the funds allocated under the shared management funds, as well as for the reduction in the rate of regional aid for enterprises in the districts of Pernik, Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad and Sofia District. Owing to the high GDP per capita of Sofia City, districts such as Kyustendil and Pernik, which have considerably lower GDP values, are severely disadvantaged compared with other districts in the country that also have low GDP per capita, such as Haskovo, Sliven and Silistra. The latter, falling within the "less developed regions" rather than a "transition region", are better off and receive more funding from EU funds.

The act draws attention to the fact that the formation of the statistical regions must also be linked to a package of legislative solutions defining the role of the planning

regions in the next programming period, in order to create conditions for promoting the regional development of the country and to ensure real access to European funds for all citizens, business and non-profit organisations.

The ESC insists that a consensus national position on the subject be formed no later than March 2025, since next year the EC will present its proposals for the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2028–2034.

➢ **Opinion "Stimulation Policies for Bulgaria's Catch-Up Economic Growth", adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.12.2024.**

The objectives set by the Council are: to focus the debate on the policies Bulgaria needs in order to achieve catch-up economic growth; to show the strengths and weaknesses of Bulgarian economic policy and the risks it faces; and to provide recommendations from organised civil society for achieving fiscal sustainability of the Bulgarian economy.

The opinion places emphasis on the assertion that policies for generating catch-up economic growth must be the focus of the executive and legislative authorities, and that Bulgaria must work systematically to improve its position on all key indicators used to measure the competitiveness of the Bulgarian economy. The document recommends that the state budget be used to stimulate investment activity aimed at the structural transformation of the economy. The document raises the issue that Bulgaria is still not making good use of European financial instruments such as NextGenerationEU, which provide funding on favourable terms for stimulating or transforming the economy.

Particular attention is drawn to the fact that Bulgaria needs a process of fiscal reforms aimed at increasing the efficiency of expenditure by improving public finance management, increasing the efficiency of public investment, reducing the "grey economy", reforming the pension system and improving the efficiency of state-owned enterprises; the necessary wide-ranging structural reforms are described, including policies

to increase employment and labour productivity; to increase gross private domestic investment and foreign direct investment; and to improve competitiveness and further integrate Bulgarian companies into global and regional value chains.

The opinion points out the need to pursue policies to improve public sector governance and the transparency of governance, tackle corruption, improve the anti-money laundering framework, invest in infrastructure and human capital, and strengthen the green transition while preserving the security of energy supply; it explains that public investment should be directed not only towards infrastructure but also towards improving the quality of human capital.

- **Declaration on the Accession of Bulgaria to the Euro Area (BG), adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.12.2024.**

The ESC has expressed a consistent position for years, presenting, including through a number of its acts, the many positive effects of the accession of the Republic of Bulgaria to the euro area.

With this declaration, the ESC urges the Bulgarian authorities to prepare as soon as possible to implement the decision of the National Assembly and, once the price stability criterion has been met, within two weeks of its fulfilment, to request extraordinary convergence reports from the European Commission (EC) and the European Central Bank (ECB).

This step is extremely important so that there is a real possibility for our country to become part of the single currency area as of 01.01.2026. Missing a third consecutive year would be a negative scenario for economic development, both for business in Bulgaria and for workers and civil society in our country.

3. Plenary Session meetings

In the period 01.01.2024 – 31.12.2024, 12 Plenary Session meetings of the ESC were held:

➢ **First Plenary Session meeting, 01.02.2024**

At the first Plenary Session meeting of the ESC for 2024, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session held on 18.12.2023 were approved.

In addition, pursuant to Article 12(2) of the ESC Act, the following were discussed and adopted:

- the Activity Report of the ESC for 2023 (BG);
- the Report on the implementation of the annual budget of the ESC for 2023;
- the ESC Action Plan 2024.

➢ **Second Plenary Session meeting, 23.02.2024**

At the second Plenary Session meeting of the ESC, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session held on 01.02.2024 were approved. At the meeting, pursuant to Article 12(3) of the ESC Act, the draft budget of the ESC for 2025 and the budget forecast for the period 2026–2027 were discussed and approved.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the "Analysis of the causes, factors and trends for the formation and scope of the group of so-called 'in-work poverty'. Recommendations and proposals for legislative changes to limit this phenomenon". The analysis was prepared on the basis of a letter from the President of the 49th National Assembly (their ref. No АД-49-350-06-235/28.08.2023) and pursuant to Article 5(1) of the ESC Act. The draft analysis was assigned to the Committee on Labour, Income, Living Standards and Industrial Relations, which held two meetings on the subject. The rapporteur was Atanas Katsarchev, member of the ESC from Group II.

➢ **Third Plenary Session meeting, 25.03.2024**

At the third Plenary Session meeting of the ESC, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session held on 23.02.2024 were approved.

At the meeting, the "Analysis of the requirements for Bulgaria under Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms" was discussed and adopted; it was prepared on the Council's own

initiative and assigned to the Committee on Social Policy. The rapporteurs appointed were Teodor Dechev from Group I, Chavdar Hristov from Group II and Tatyana Kmetova from Group III.

The resolution "National Just Transition Plan – a key instrument for implementing the transition to a climate-neutral economy" (BG) was discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the Presidential Council, with the Vice-Presidents of the ESC as rapporteurs: Evgeniy Ivanov – Group I, Plamen Dimitrov – Group II and Bogomil Nikolov – Group III.

The "Analysis of the interaction between civil society organisations and national and local institutions in response and in times of crisis" was discussed and adopted; it was prepared on the Council's own initiative and assigned to the Committee on European Policies and the European Process. The rapporteurs appointed for the analysis were Radka Yosifova – Group I, Veselin Mitov – Group II and Teodora Bakardzhieva – Group III.

- **Fourth Plenary Session meeting, 17.04.2024**

At the fourth meeting, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session held on 25.03.2024 were approved.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the "Analysis on the possibilities of simplifying and speeding up the procedures for access to the labour market of workers and highly qualified personnel from third countries for the needs of Bulgarian business", prepared in implementation of Council of Ministers Decision No 923/21.12.2023 and pursuant to Article 5(1) of the ESC Act. The draft analysis was prepared by the Committee on Economic Policy and the Committee on Labour, Income, Living Standards and Industrial Relations, with rapporteurs Maria Mincheva – Group I and Andon Rokov – Group II. Representatives of the institutions concerned took part in the discussion of the analysis: deputy ministers and experts from the Ministry of Innovation and Growth and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and experts from the Ministry of Interior, the Migration Directorate and the State Agency for National Security.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the analysis "European requirements and perspectives for cyber resilient Bulgaria", prepared by the Committee on European Policies and the European Process, with rapporteur Atanas Temelkov – Group I.

- **Fifth Plenary Session meeting, 17.05.2024**

The meeting began with the approval of the minutes of the previous meeting, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure.

The meeting was attended by Yordanka Chobanova, Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria, Metodi Metodiev, Deputy Minister of Finance, and experts from the Ministry of Finance.

The Plenary Session adopted the "Updated analysis of the demographic and socio-economic development of the planning regions – results and state of play", prepared at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria by letter ref. No РД-08-7/18.01.2024. The draft analysis was prepared by an ad hoc committee co-chaired by the Vice-Presidents of the ESC, with rapporteurs Rumyana Georgieva – Group I, Lyuboslav Kostov – Group II and Ofelia Kaneva – Group III.

The members of the Plenary Session discussed and adopted the opinion "The European Semester in Bulgaria – challenges and opportunities" (BG), prepared by the Committee on European Policies and the European Process and the Committee on Economic Policy, with rapporteurs Maria Mincheva – Group I and Lyuboslav Kostov – Group II.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the ESC Resolution on "The Accession of Bulgaria to the Euro Area" (BG), prepared by the Committee on Macroeconomics, Budget and Finance, with the Vice-Presidents of the ESC as rapporteurs: Evgeniy Ivanov (Group I), Plamen Dimitrov (Group II) and Bogomil Nikolov (Group III).

- **Sixth Plenary Session meeting, 17.06.2024**

The Plenary Session, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, approved the minutes of the previous meeting.

At the meeting, the "Analysis of ILO Convention No 154 concerning the promotion of collective bargaining" (BG) was discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the Committee on Labour, Income, Living Standards and Industrial Relations, with rapporteur Chavdar Hristov – Group II.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the opinion "Strategic planning in Bulgaria – challenges and opportunities for a green and digital transition", prepared by the Committee on Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Environment and Regional Policies, with rapporteurs Maria Mincheva – Group I, Aleksandar Zagorov – Group II and Ina Agafonova – Group III.

The "Analysis of the working conditions and opportunities for coal-fired power plants in the transformation of coal regions towards low-carbon energy" was also discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the Committee on Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Environment and Regional Policies, with rapporteur Ognyan Atanasov – Group II. Experts from the Ministry of Finance attended the discussion of the draft analysis.

- **Seventh Plenary Session meeting, 19.07.2024**

The Plenary Session, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, approved the minutes of the previous meeting and discussed and adopted two acts.

The opinion "Accelerating the development of the social economy in Bulgaria in response to contemporary challenges" was prepared by the Committee on Social Policy, with rapporteurs Asia Goneva – Group II and Elitsa Barakova – Group III. Natalia Efremova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, and Nikolay Pavlov, Deputy Minister of Economy and Industry, also took part in the discussion.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the analysis "The free electricity market: problems and challenges, measures to improve energy efficiency and support for households", prepared by the Committee on Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Environment and Regional Policies and the Committee on Labour, Income, Living Standards and Industrial Relations, with rapporteurs Andon Rokov – Group II and Bogomil Nikolov – Group III.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted an updated ESC Action Plan 2024.

- **Eighth Plenary Session meeting, 11.09.2024**

At the eighth Plenary Session meeting, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session meeting held on 19 July 2024 were approved.

At the Plenary Session, the "Analysis of inequalities in education and their impact on the labour market in Bulgaria. Solutions for readjusting the education system towards the applicability of knowledge and the formation of social skills" (BG), proposed by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, was discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the ad hoc committee

chaired by Ivelin Zhelyazkov, with rapporteurs Teodor Dechev – Group I, Lyuboslav Kostov – Group II and Kostadin Kolarov – Group III.

At the Plenary Session, the ESC Resolution on the accession of Bulgaria to the OECD (BG) was discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the Presidential Council, with the Vice-Presidents of the ESC as rapporteurs: Evgeni Ivanov – Group I, Plamen Dimitrov – Group II and Bogomil Nikolov – Group III.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted an ESC Declaration on the Bill on the Registration of Foreign Agents (BG).

The Plenary Session discussed and approved an updated draft budget of the ESC for 2025 and an updated budget forecast for 2026–2028.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the ESC Rules of Procedure with the amendments made to them, together with a Template for the preparation of the ESC Action Plan.

- **Ninth Plenary Session meeting, 04.10.2024**

At the ninth Plenary Session meeting, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, the minutes of the Plenary Session meeting held on 11 September 2024 were approved. At the Plenary Session, the "Analysis of the expected effects of artificial intelligence on the labour market in Bulgaria. Proposals for concrete measures to overcome the problems" was discussed and adopted at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria; it was prepared by the Committee on Labour, Income, Living Standards and Industrial Relations and the Committee on Economic Policy, with rapporteurs Valentina Zartova – Group I, Aleksandar Zagorov – Group II and Ina Agafonova – Group III.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted an updated ESC Action Plan 2024.

During the Plenary Session, Lasse Melgaard, World Bank Resident Representative for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and Monica Robayo, Senior Economist at the World Bank, presented to the members of the ESC a package of policy working papers on the following topics:

- developing a concept for, and measuring, energy poverty in Bulgaria;
- simulating how changes in monthly social assistance and heating allowances in Bulgaria affect well-being.

- **Tenth Plenary Session meeting, 20.11.2024**

At the tenth meeting, the Plenary Session, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, approved the minutes of the Plenary Session meeting held on 4 October 2024. The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the opinion "Problems and challenges for the competitiveness of Bulgarian agricultural producers" (BG), prepared by the Committee on Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Environment and Regional Policies, with rapporteur Natalia Shukadarova, member of the ESC from Group III.

At the Plenary Session, the ESC Resolution on the Bill on the Registration of Foreign Agents (BG) was discussed and adopted; it was prepared by the Presidential Council, with the Vice-Presidents of the ESC as rapporteurs: Evgeniy Ivanov (Group I), Plamen Dimitrov (Group II) and Bogomil Nikolov (Group III).

The Plenary Session discussed a proposal by the Ministry of Finance for the Council to prepare an act in support of the state's efforts in the process of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area, and decided that the Presidential Council would prepare a draft declaration and submit it for discussion at a Plenary Session in December. The Plenary Session also decided to prepare a plan for holding six regional events in implementation of Council of Ministers Decree No 333 of 1 October 2024 amending and supplementing Council of Ministers Decree No 480 of 2022, in which the ESC is designated as an institution to be engaged in communication activities on the process of introducing the euro.

- **Eleventh Plenary Session meeting, 13.12.2024**

At the eleventh meeting, the Plenary Session, pursuant to Article 12(4) of the ESC Rules of Procedure, approved the minutes of the Plenary Session meeting held on 20 November 2024.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the opinion "Planning regions in the Republic of Bulgaria at NUTS 2 level" (BG), prepared by the Committee on Macroeconomics, Budget and Finance, with rapporteurs Assoc. Prof. Dr Milena Angelova from Group I, Mr Aleksandar Zagorov from Group II and Prof. Lalko Dulevski from Group III. Representatives of the institutions competent in the field also took part in the meeting: a Deputy Minister of Regional Development and

Public Works, the President of the NSI and experts, and representatives of the EC Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy and of the EC Representation in Bulgaria.

The "Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement" was also discussed and adopted; its preparation was proposed by the President of the 49th National Assembly pursuant to Article 5(1) and in connection with Article 4(1), point 5 of the Economic and Social Council Act, by letter No АД-49-350-06-235 of 28.08.2023. The analysis was prepared by an ad hoc committee co-chaired by the Vice-Presidents of the ESC, Evgeniy Ivanov, Plamen Dimitrov and Bogomil Nikolov, with the following members: Ivelin Zhelyazkov and Maria Mincheva (Group I), Asia Goneva and Valeri Apostolov (Group II) and Ofelia Kaneva and Kostadin Kolarov (Group III). The rapporteurs for the act were Ivelin Zhelyazkov, Asia Goneva and Ofelia Kaneva.

Representatives of the institutions concerned also took part in the discussion of the analysis: the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy and the Deputy Chair of the Financial Supervision Commission.

During the meeting, Maria Mincheva (Group I) presented the EESC act "The cost of non-Schengen for the single market – impact on Bulgaria and Romania", for which she is the rapporteur. In the discussion, the members of the ESC highlighted the expected positive effects for the country's economy following the decision of 12.12.2024 of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU to lift checks at internal land borders for Bulgaria and Romania.

- **Twelfth Plenary Session meeting, 19.12.2024**

At the twelfth Plenary Session meeting, the opinion "Stimulation Policies for Bulgaria's Catch-Up Economic Growth" was discussed and adopted. The preparation of the opinion was assigned to the Committee on Economic Policy. The rapporteurs appointed were Maria Mincheva, member of the ESC from Group I, and Lyuboslav Kostov, member of the ESC from Group II, and their work was supported by the external experts Shteryo Nozharov and Petar Mishev.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the ESC Declaration on the Accession of Bulgaria to the Euro Area (BG), the main purpose of which is to call on the authorities, as soon as the

criteria are met, to submit a request for extraordinary convergence reports from the European Commission (EC) and the European Central Bank (ECB). In addition, it was decided that in January of the following year the ESC would prepare a resolution on the subject.

The Plenary Session discussed and adopted the ESC Action Plan 2025 (BG).

The official guest was the President of the 51st National Assembly, Assoc. Prof. Natalia Kiselova. During the discussion, the President of the National Assembly and the members of the Council discussed the topics of greatest current relevance to society. It was noted that this was the first time a President of the National Assembly had attended a Plenary Session meeting of the ESC, and that for the first time the Rules of Organisation and Procedure of the National Assembly, adopted on 18 December 2024, contain an explicit provision, in Article 73(7), enabling the chair of the lead committee, through the President of the National Assembly, to request an opinion from the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria on bills concerning the economic and social development of the country.

III. CONSULTATIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND MEETINGS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LEGISLATIVE AND EXECUTIVE AUTHORITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY ON SOCIALLY SIGNIFICANT ISSUES OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

In implementation of the adopted priorities and the objectives set, as well as of the Action Plan for 2024, the ESC organised and took part in a large number of events – discussions, conferences, forums, meetings and consultations with representatives of the legislative and executive authorities and civil society on topical issues of public significance for the country. The acts adopted by the Council were presented and discussed at working meetings and round tables with representatives of the legislative and executive authorities.

During the reporting period, the ESC's active partnership with academic institutions and youth organisations was reflected in the joint organisation and holding of a large number of forums, thematic meetings, and presentations and discussions of the Council's acts.

➢ **Presentation of adopted ESC acts on important socio-economic topics for the country to representatives of the legislative and executive authorities**

In 2024, too, the ESC organised and participated in a series of events aimed at presenting and discussing the acts adopted by the Council with representatives of the legislative and executive authorities:

◆ **Participation in** a meeting of the National Assembly Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy. Under the item "Any other business", a coordination meeting was held with the Group II rapporteur Atanas Katsarchev, the President of the ESC Zornitsa Rusinova and the external experts on the analysis, in order to discuss the scope and expectations of the proposed "Analysis of the causes, factors and trends for the formation and scope of the group of so-called 'in-work poverty'. Recommendations and proposals for legislative changes to limit this phenomenon", on 17.01.2024.

◆ **Participation in** the presentation of the book "The Development of Youth Policy in Bulgaria after 1989" by Dr Lilia Elenkova on 31.01.2024. During the discussion, Ofelia Kaneva presented the ESC document "Analysis of the participation of young people in decision-making processes in Bulgaria and in the EU, including with a focus on 'green' solutions and digitalisation". The event was attended by politicians, public figures and youth leaders, representatives of academia and of the civil youth sector. The date of the event was not chosen by chance, since exactly one year earlier, by Decision No 1 of the National Assembly of 31.01.2023, the National Youth Strategy (2021–2030) had been adopted.

◆ Coordination meeting on 7 February 2024, at the proposal of the Chair of the Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy of the 49th National Assembly, Denitsa Sacheva, with the Presidential Council of the ESC and the rapporteurs on the "Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement", as well as with the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Ivanka Shalapatova, and her team. The meeting discussed the scope and structure of the analysis under preparation, as well as the interaction between the legislative and executive authorities and the representatives of organised civil society in the process of preparing the analysis.

◆ **Participation in** a panel of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on "How countries are using micro-credentials to reshape their workforce" on 14.02.2024. During the discussion, the opinion "Necessary amendments and supplements to the Vocational Education and Training Act. Introduction and possible approaches to implementing in national practice the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts and the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability", adopted in May 2023, was presented.

◆ Round table on "Presentation of the CDE Index 2023 in Bulgaria and discussion of the Digital Decade targets to 2030" on 19.02.2024. Representatives of the ESC contributed concrete proposals to the discussion organised by the Bulgarian National Association "Active Consumers". Acts of the Council related to technological transformation and digitalisation were presented. ESC members Milena Angelova and Atanas Temelkov took part in the discussion.

◆ **Participation in** the forum "The Cost of the Personal Transition" on 16.02.2024. During the panel discussion on "A just green transition – solutions to economic and demographic challenges", Ognyan Atanasov, member of the ESC, presented the positions set out in the ESC opinion "The EC legislative initiative 'Fit for 55' in the Bulgarian context". The panel also discussed the positions set out in the ESC opinion "Energy, water and transport poverty – specific features of their manifestation and measures to overcome them".

◆ **Participation in** a discussion organised by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research on "Challenges for long-term care in the Western Balkans" on 20.02.2024. During the discussion, the opinion "The European Care Strategy – guidelines for its implementation in Bulgaria", adopted in March 2023, was presented.

◆ **Participation in the conference** "Digital services in support of care for older people in the home environment" on 14.03.2024. The opening of the conference, organised by the Bulgarian Red Cross, was attended by the President of the Economic and Social

Council, Elka Nalbantova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Assoc. Prof. Mihail Okoliyski, Deputy Minister of Health, representatives of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, the mayors of the Municipality of Belogradchik and the Municipality of Oryahovo, and experts from the non-governmental sector.

- **Participation in** a meeting of the Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy of the 49th National Assembly on 28.03.2024. During the regular meeting of the committee, a discussion was held on the scope, structure and expectations of the proposed "Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement". The members of the ad hoc committee specially set up within the ESC took part in the meeting.

- **Participation in** a meeting of the Advisory Council on Corporate Social Responsibility at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy on 21 March 2024. The meeting discussed the draft CSR strategy for 2024–2027, the progress of its adoption, and possibilities for including measures in the Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the period 2024–2025. A discussion was also held on the Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 and on the envisaged Roadmap for the implementation of the European documents relating to corporate sustainability.

- **Participation in** a meeting of the Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy of the 49th National Assembly on 24.04.2024. The President of the ESC, together with the rapporteurs and external experts on the "Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement", members of the ESC ad hoc committee responsible for preparing the analysis, took part in the discussion on the presentation of the "Survey of public attitudes towards updating the existing pension system", conducted by the National Centre for Parliamentary Research.

- **Participation in** the "Children's Day of the Social Enterprises Family" on 3 June 2024 at the Kambanite park complex. The event was organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy – Regional Centre for Social Economy, Blagoevgrad, as part of the activities implementing Project P41 "Development of the Social Economy".

- **Participation in** the Green Transition conference on 28 June 2024 in Sofia – the President of the ESC moderated the discussion within the panel "Navigating the nexus:

mapping the jobs of the future in the green and digital era", in which Oliver Röpke, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Plamen Dimitrov, President of CITUB and Vice-President of the ESC, and Vasil Vasilev, Chair of the Management Board of the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), took part.

- **Participation in** the "KOOP BANKYA 2024" festival of the National Union of Workers' Productive Cooperatives of People with Disabilities in Bankya on 4 July 2024. In her address, the President of the ESC presented the ESC's work on a comprehensive analysis of the employment of people with disabilities. Representatives of the competent institutions took part in the event.

- **Participation in** "Burgas Digital 2024: What will be the effect of artificial intelligence on business and the labour market?" on 27 September 2024. The Burgas Digital 2024 technology conference is a joint initiative of the Municipality of Burgas, DIGIHUB, Sofia Tech Park and Central Park, with the support of the Ministry of Innovation and Growth. The President of the Economic and Social Council took part in the opening and presented the Council's work on the subject. Ina Agafonova, member of the ESC and rapporteur on the analysis, also took part, presenting the results of the analysis of the expected effects of artificial intelligence on the labour market in Bulgaria.

- **Participation in** the opening of the Twelfth European Forum of Social and Solidarity Economy Actors, organised by the National Union of Workers' Productive Cooperatives with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, on 15 October 2024.

- **Participation in the conference** "Social finance instruments in Bulgaria", 20 November 2024. Representatives of European and national institutions and of the financial and banking sector took part in the forum. The organisers of the conference had set among the main objectives of the event a discussion of the possibilities for creating a supportive ecosystem for the development of the social economy and social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. The President of the ESC and Elitsa Barakova, member of the ESC and rapporteur on the act, took part in the conference and presented the opinion "Accelerating the development of the social economy in Bulgaria in response to contemporary challenges".

In 2024, the ESC continued to build on the achievements of the large-scale thematic campaigns conducted in 2023, which address topical issues:

◆ In support of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area – the Economic and Social Council has positioned itself as one of the main initiators and drivers of the debate on Bulgaria's accession to the euro area. The ESC's consistent and expert position on Bulgaria's accession to the euro area and its endeavour to promote widely the conclusions and recommendations of its acts were supported by Council of Ministers Decree No 333 of 1 October 2024 amending and supplementing Council of Ministers Decree No 480 of 2022, in which the ESC is designated as an institution to be engaged in communication activities on the process of introducing the euro.

- Communication activities: In 2024, the ESC continued to actively promote the process of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area by preparing and adopting acts and by initiating and participating in public discussions on the subject with a wide range of stakeholders and partners. In the communication activities carried out by the Council, the aim was for the objective conclusions of the ESC's acts to be widely presented in the information channels and to counter firmly and in an organised manner the disinformation campaign being waged, by not allowing Bulgarian society to be deliberately alarmed and misled about non-existent dangers to living standards as a result of the introduction of the euro.
- Media information campaign on the subject: Representatives of all three groups of the Council took part in a series of interviews in the electronic media and on social networks, presenting the ESC's acts on the subject and highlighting the reasons why organised civil society supports Bulgaria's membership of the euro area.
- In order to help raise public awareness, the ESC also presented its expert position at a series of events:
- 7th Banking and Finance Forum "The Future of Money" (15.10.2024): the ESC took part in the discussion of topics related to the readiness of the banking sector in Bulgaria for the country's entry into the euro area and for the adoption of the euro, as well as how this will affect

the price and the scope of banking products in Bulgaria. In the "Economic Growth" discussion panel, the President of the ESC defended the Council's position that Bulgaria's accession to the euro area is a further step in the country's European integration and in bringing it closer to some of the most developed countries in Europe. The focus was placed on the role of organised civil society in the overall process and in informing Bulgarian citizens, workers and employers in a timely manner about the protection of their savings and investments, about the measures to counter artificial price increases at the time of the changeover to the euro, and about guaranteeing that the current exchange rate is preserved upon the changeover to the euro.

- "Euro Week at UNWE and the Tenth Annual Monetary and Economic Scientific Conference on Digital Transformation and Economic Recovery in the Post-Crisis Period". A public discussion devoted to Bulgaria's accession to the euro area, 18 November 2024. At the event, co-organised by the ESC, emphasis was once again placed on the benefits of Bulgaria's admission to the euro area for the country's economic prosperity, and the activities undertaken so far to prepare the country for the changeover from the lev to the euro were discussed, with a focus on vulnerable consumers, older people and persons with disabilities.

◆ Support for the campaign against disinformation: in 2024 the ESC continued its work against the spread of disinformation and built on the achievements of the 2023 campaign entitled "Organised Civil Society against Disinformation". This year the ESC focused on topics and issues that are most frequently the target of disinformation campaigns, such as Bulgaria's full membership of Schengen and the euro area, participation in the European elections, Bulgaria's accession to the OECD, the Bill on the Registration of Foreign Agents, etc. Through the active media presentation of the ESC's acts and by enabling the ESC's experts to defend the Council's position, the campaign demonstrated that organised civil society can uphold open democratic debate and limit the influence of disinformation.

- In addition, the Council organised and took part in a series of large-scale events – national and international – related to the fight against fake news:

- International conference "Citizens Can Counter Disinformation", 18 April 2024, Chișinău, Moldova – the President of the ESC was invited by the EESC to share the experience of Bulgarian organised civil society at an international conference in Chișinău. The conference in Moldova was part of the EESC's campaign to tackle disinformation, which was launched in Sofia on 12 June 2023 with a week dedicated to the fight against disinformation. Following the successful campaign in Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova was chosen as the centre of the EESC's campaign for 2024. The conference focused on information and disinformation in the era of social media and on the role of organised civil society in combating this negative phenomenon.
- Round table on "Organised Civil Society through the Prism of the 2024 European Elections: Upholding Open Democratic Debate", 9 May 2024, UNWE – The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria, in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), marked 9 May, Europe Day, by organising a round table on "Organised Civil Society through the Prism of the 2024 European Elections: Upholding Open Democratic Debate". The event focused on the opportunity for Bulgarian citizens to exercise their democratic right to vote in the elections to the European Parliament to be held on 9 June 2024. Particular attention was paid to young people and to engaging them with the challenges of the information flow and social networks.
- Information activities – messages from public figures, as well as posters with the campaign's key messages, were published in the electronic media and on social networks.

➢ **Cooperation agreements**

In 2024 the ESC once again continued to build on and develop its cooperation with scientific and educational institutions, as well as with national Economic and Social Councils and similar organisations.

◆ **Cooperation with scientific and educational institutions:**

- The focus of the joint activities with the universities with which the Council has signed a cooperation agreement (the University of National and World Economy, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Burgas Free University, the University of Economics – Varna, and the International Business School) was on holding joint forums and organising open lectures on topical issues with the participation of members of the Council.
- In addition, this year the ESC expanded its network of partner organisations by signing a cooperation agreement with:
- "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" University – Burgas: On 24 June 2024 the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria and "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" University in Burgas signed a memorandum committing them to joint action in support of the work of the Council and the education of students at the higher education institution.
- University of Mining and Geology "St. Ivan Rilski": On 13 November 2024 the Economic and Social Council and the University of Mining and Geology "St. Ivan Rilski" signed a memorandum committing them to joint action in support of the work of the Council and the education of students at the higher education institution. Under the memorandum, the two parties will work together to support the quality of education of students and doctoral candidates at the University of Mining and Geology by organising public lectures and discussions, and will also organise other appropriate initiatives.

◆ **Cooperation with the National Youth Forum:** On 11 September 2024 the Economic and Social Council (ESC) and the National Youth Forum (NYF) concluded a memorandum of cooperation in the field of youth policy. In implementation of the partnership agreement signed, the ESC supported the organisation of the national youth conference "Social Inclusion and Participation of Young People" in the town of Pernik on 31.10.2024, and took part in national youth initiatives – the National Youth Forum "Young People's Rights 'Here and Now'" on 12.09.2024 and the festival "Democratic Mosaic – a Stage for Civil Society" on 18.10.2024.

◆ Memoranda in the field of international cooperation: The Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria is working purposefully on implementing the provisions of

the memoranda of cooperation concluded with the Economic and Social Council of Greece, the Economic and Social Council of the Kingdom of Spain, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of France and the Economic and Social Council of Romania.

IV. COOPERATION WITH THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND OTHER SIMILAR NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS. PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS, CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

In 2024 the ESC took an active part in various international meetings, conferences and events within the framework of its cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), European institutions, the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS), EUROMED and other similar national or international forums and organisations:

- **Cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee:**
  - Bilateral meetings were held between the President of the ESC and Oliver Röpke, President of the EESC, on 21.03.2024, 28.05.2024, 20.06.2024 and 09.12.2024. At a special event on 21.03.2024, the President of the ESC presented an honorary plaque to the President of the EESC, Oliver Röpke, for his contribution to the development of Bulgarian organised civil society and on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the ESC, as well as for the lasting and fruitful cooperation established between the two organisations. The Bulgarian members of the Committee attended the ceremony. The event was officially covered on the websites of the EESC and the ESC, and in the media and on social networks.
  - Participation in a high-level debate related to the European elections in the framework of the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels, 20–21 March 2024. The discussion took place during the Committee's plenary session on 20–21 March 2024.
  - Participation in the conference "Citizens Can Defeat Disinformation", Chișinău, Moldova. On 18.04.2024 an international

conference entitled “Citizens Can Defeat Disinformation”, organised by the EESC, was held at the Moldova State University in Chișinău.

- Participation in the Annual Meeting of the Presidents and Secretaries-General of the European Economic and Social Committee and the Economic and Social Councils of the EU Member States on 19 and 20 June 2024 in Brussels. The annual meeting of the EESC leadership with the economic and social councils of the EU countries was devoted to the theme “From words to action: the role of organised civil society in the implementation and evaluation of public policies – the twin transition”. The conference adopted a document reflecting the results achieved by all countries with regard to the green transition and digitalisation, the mechanisms for taking into account the needs of the individual, and the future of jobs in the regions affected by the transformation. The annual meeting was followed by a seminar held on 20 June 2024 on “Transition to a green, digital, fair and competitive Europe: the role of social and civil dialogue”.
- Participation in the “Connecting Europe” seminar organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – 17–18.10.2024. The seminar, entitled “The last bastion of democracy: helping journalism to survive and thrive”, was organised by the EESC and is a meeting of civil society organisations and public relations experts from the national economic councils of the EU Member States and the EESC.
- Participation in the thematic event “The cost of remaining outside the Schengen area – the impact on Bulgaria and Romania”, organised by the Bulgarian Industrial Association – Union of Bulgarian Business (BIA) together with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 24 September 2024 in Sofia. The discussion is part of the process of drawing up an EESC own-initiative opinion on “The cost of non-Schengen for the Single market – impact on Bulgaria and Romania”, with Maria Mincheva, who is also a member of the ESC, as rapporteur. During the event, the Economic and Social Councils of Bulgaria and Romania also signed a memorandum of cooperation for the purpose of exchanging good practices and experience on topical issues.
- The ESC provided technical support to the EESC by hosting two EESC thematic meetings held in Sofia on 6 June and 1 October 2024. The June meeting was devoted to the evaluation of the “Consumer Programme (INT/1053)”, while the October meeting focused on the

evaluation of the "Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2014–2020)". Participants in the meeting were members of the EESC and representatives of Bulgarian non-governmental organisations and institutions.

- Participation in the 33rd Group Meeting on the European Semester on 9 December 2024 in Brussels, aimed at discussing the European Semester Autumn Package. During the meeting, the President of the ESC presented the ESC's opinion on the topic and dwelt on the recommendations made by the ESC with a view to optimising the process and enabling more effective participation of organised civil society.
- Sharing the ESC's experience and good practices within the network of economic and social councils of the EU countries (NESCs network) and regular coverage of the ESC's acts and initiatives in the EESC's monthly newsletter.

➢ **"Erasmus for Civil Society" initiative of the economic and social councils in the European Union – Activities under the initiative proposed in 2023 by the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of France for the exchange of expertise and good practices between the economic and social councils in the European Union continued during the reporting year. Representatives of the ESC took part in the following thematic meetings under the initiative:**

- Participation in a meeting devoted to "Geopolitics, strategic autonomy and reindustrialisation", organised by the Economic and Social Council of Portugal in Lisbon, from 5 to 7 February 2024. The ESC was represented at the meeting by Georgi Stoev (member of the ESC from Group I) and Atanas Katsarchev (member of the ESC from Group II).
- Participation in a meeting devoted to the development of agricultural policy, organised by the National Council for Economics and Labour of Italy (CNEL) in Rome, from 27 to 28 June 2024. The ESC's position on the topic was presented by Nataliya Shukadarova, member of the ESC from Group III.

➢ **Participation in the international conference "Making the green transition in the Western Balkans a real opportunity for working people", on 29 February 2024, organised by CL "Podkrepa": Members of the ESC took part in the opening of the forum and**

stressed that the European Green Deal and the sustainable development of Bulgaria are at the focus of the Council's work.

➢ **Participation in the international conference "Transposition of the Directive on adequate minimum wages in the EU – a key factor for the future of work: quality employment with guaranteed social security", organised by CL "Podkrepa": Representatives of the ESC took part in the event and presented the Council's position, which over the last two years has been set out in more than 10 acts concerning incomes, including with regard to the transposition of the Directive on adequate minimum wages.**

➢ **Participation in the 9th Cohesion Forum, 11–12.04.2024, in Brussels: The Ninth Forum on Cohesion Policy brought together more than 1 000 representatives of EU institutions; national, regional and local authorities from all EU Member States; social and economic partners; non-governmental organisations and others. The Bulgarian delegation included representatives of the three groups of the ESC.**

➢ **Presentation of a report entitled "Another view from the EU: the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria" at a meeting of the economic and social councils of the Ibero-American region on "Democracy, agreements and consensus. Social dialogue: a tool for strengthening democracy. Today's challenges in the Ibero-American region" on 7 May 2024, and participation in the third edition of #TalentoPúblico on 20.06.2024 in Madrid, Spain.**

➢ **Participation in the General Assembly of the Union of Francophone Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (UCESIF), 25–26.06.2024, in Paris, France, and remote participation in the General Assembly of AICESIS, 6.11.2024, in Shanghai, People's Republic of China.**

➢ **On 26.09.2024 a meeting was held in Sofia with representatives of the secretariats of the Economic and Social Councils of Spain and Bulgaria. The aim of the meeting was to start work on implementing the memorandum of cooperation between the two councils**

and to clarify, at technical level, the organisation and holding of the first bilateral event in Madrid in 2025.

➢ **Cooperation with the World Bank in Bulgaria: The ESC was invited to take part in the consultation process on the World Bank's five-year programme for Bulgaria. Working meetings were also held between the President of the ESC and the World Bank's Country Manager for Bulgaria, Czechia and Slovakia, Mr Lasse Melgaard, to plan joint activities. The practice of presenting the Bank's studies and analyses to the members of the Council was continued. At the ESC Plenary Session meeting on 04.10.2024, two working papers were presented and discussed: "Developing a concept and measuring energy poverty in Bulgaria" and "Simulating how changes in monthly social assistance and heating allowances in Bulgaria affect welfare".**

➢ **Participation in the international conference "Social partnership as a key instrument for achieving tangible change in the Western Balkans", organised by CL "Podkrepa" on 31.10.2024: Members of the ESC, representing all three groups, took part in the event and contributed to the debate.**

➢ **Participation in the international conference "Demography – Migration – Labour Markets" in Athens, Greece, on 01–03.12.2024, organised by the Greek ESC and AICESIS: The President of the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria moderated a panel devoted to demographic challenges and presented the Council's work on the topics raised by the conference, including the conclusions of the ESC's two analyses on the subject.**

V. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL IN THE MEDIA

➢ **Analysis of the media coverage of the Council's activities in 2024**

Overview: In 2024 the ESC achieved a significant media presence, exceeding 500 publications on various topics related to the Council's activities. Good coverage

was observed across all media channels and formats – national and regional, print, online, radio and television.

Information about the activities of the ESC and the acts under preparation is communicated in a targeted manner through press releases to the media and through interviews with rapporteurs and the leadership giving specific details on the topics. The media also report quotations from the ESC's acts, which they use for their journalistic material, sometimes including comments from third parties. Another part of the media coverage comes from the reporting of events in the social and economic sphere at which representatives of the Council take part as experts, moderators, speakers, etc. and comment on specific acts.

A wide audience was successfully reached thanks to a variety of communication channels and a strategic selection of topics. There are publications on almost every existing genuine news platform with a multi-thematic or economic profile, which means that we have reached a high percentage of Bulgarian citizens.

The messages communicated about the ESC's activities most often relate to the current acts adopted by the Council during the period concerned. The greatest media interest is generated by social and consumer topics – in 2024 these were the ESC's recommendations on overcoming the problem of the working poor, the mechanisms for protecting consumers in the liberalisation of the electricity market for household consumers, and the topic gaining momentum on which the ESC worked until the last month of the year – recommendations for improving the pension system.

Significant interest was attracted by the topic of the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) in the labour market, as well as by appearances on the topic of how the euro area will change the situation in the country with regard to incomes, business, etc.

Summary: In 2024 the ESC achieved considerable reach and diversity in the media coverage of its activities. The communication strategies used and the varied forms of presenting information contribute to reaching a wide audience and to raising public awareness of the ESC as the institution that brings together the consensus opinion of groups with different interests, such as employers, trade unions and civil society organisations.

- **Total number of media reports: >500**

- Coverage of press releases: Between 10 and 40 reports for each communication by the Council in regional and national online media, depending on the topic.
- Interviews: The interviews with rapporteurs of ESC acts conducted this year show significant growth. This helps to showcase the institution's broad expertise, to promote the key points of specific topics and the Council's contribution to shaping the country's current policies, and also to present the members of the various groups of the ESC. Rapporteurs from all groups took part in the intensive media campaign on specific acts in 2024, with their positions being covered in print media, TV programmes, podcasts and elsewhere.
- Proactive journalistic interest in topics such as pensions, the labour market and consumer issues: Leading media (BTA, BNR, 24 Chasa, Dir, money.bg), whose social and economic affairs reporters take an interest in the ESC's topics, regularly develop their own content based on the Council's acts and press releases, and seek comments from its members on the subject.
- Presence in all major media formats:
- National television channels (BNT, bTV, NOVA, Bulgaria On Air, Euronews)
- Radio stations (BNR – "Horizont" programme, Radio "Sofia", regional programmes, Radio "Focus")
- News agencies (BTA, Focus-news)
- Leading online and print publications (24 Chasa, Dir.bg, Novini.bg, News.bg, Dnes.bg, Trud.bg, Mediapool.bg, Telegraph.bg, others)
- Economic media (Money.bg, Dnevnik.bg, Economic.bg, Investor.bg, others)
- Regional media (Burgas Info, Flagman, Maritsa Plovdiv, ProNews Dobrich, Zarata Stara Zagora, Utro Ruse, others)
- Podcast – Money.bg
- **Successful outreach to different target groups through a variety of media channels – from economic publications to mass media.**
- **Months with increased coverage:**

- February – wide coverage of the main conclusions and recommendations of the analysis on the working poor, including interviews on the topic and the use of quotations in news reports.
- July–August – huge coverage (more than 80 publications) of the consumer topic of the liberalisation of the electricity market, on which the ESC adopted an act in July. An active media presence linked to public interest in the topic during the summer season, when there are few news occasions for serious discussion.
- October – numerous publications on the topic of the introduction of AI in Bulgaria and the need for measures in this direction, which the ESC recommended in one of its acts.
- December – intensive coverage of several ESC topics – above all the forthcoming and subsequently adopted Analysis of the current pension system.
- **Forms of coverage:**
- Press releases: An effective tool for disseminating information about the ESC's activities. They reach national and regional media, which in most cases publish the text without editorial intervention.
- Interviews: A successful approach that increases the visibility of the ESC and contributes to a more in-depth presentation of the topics.
- Analyses and third parties quoting ESC acts: Selected information materials and journalistic pieces are evidence of the authority and influence of the ESC.
- Participation in events: The presentation of the ESC's work on various acts by the President, the Vice-Presidents, the rapporteurs and the committee chairs at various thematic forums and conferences generates additional media attention.
- Constantly keeping the topic of Bulgaria's entry into the euro area on the agenda: This ensures a consistent presence of the ESC in the media space, demonstrates a consistent line in communication and, in many cases, is widely covered because of the practical information useful to the audience.
- Cross-media reprinting: This increases the reach of coverage through the dissemination of material across different platforms of the same media group. This approach generates

multiple publications – through television appearances, the information finds its way into online publications.

- Reprinting of highlights from interviews: This increases the volume of material in media that do not have their own authors and rely on information from other sources, but nevertheless have their own audience.
- **Topics in chronological order:**

January

- Medical standard for occupational health services requested from the ESC
- ESC recommends updating the ordinance on preventive medical examinations
- The Economic and Social Council will analyse the causes and scope of the working poor[1]
- The working poor in Bulgaria account for 22%[2]

February

- Will the euro affect pensions and salaries?[3]
- The euro area is coming: how and where in Bulgaria will we exchange levs for euros if there is no bank in the locality?[4]
- Is 2025 realistic for the adoption of the euro in Bulgaria, and how will it happen?[5]

[1] https://bnr.bg/post/101942061/analiz-izsledva-kakva-chast-ot-horata-v-balgaria-sa-raboteshtite-bedni ; https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/16841819 ; https://www.investor.bg/a/539-banki-i-zastrahovateli/387815-d-radev-ako-zakonat-za-bnb-ne-se-prieme-tova-shte-blokira-prisaedinyavaneto-v-evrozonata ; https://insmarket.bg/Новини/; https://utroruse.com/article/991323/

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- ESC: We insist on qualification and requalification for the people in the Maritsa Basin[6]
- ESC with an analysis of the causes, factors and trends for the formation and scope of the group of the "working poor"[7]
- In Bulgaria 120 000 people are at risk of losing their jobs

March

- 10% of working Bulgarians are poor, but in Greece, Italy and Spain there are more (Infographic)[8]
- "One person supports the whole family": one in ten working Bulgarians lives in poverty[9]
- One in ten Bulgarians in work is poor[10]
- Expert reveals which sectors have the most working poor[11]
- The Bulgarian – supposedly has a job, yet the money is not enough[12]
- The working poor are in the administration and services[13]
- In some sectors people are hired en masse on the minimum wage[14]
- The risk of a person falling into the trap of the "working poor" is eighteen times higher if they have no education, said Zornitsa Rusinova[15]
- The share of the "working poor" in Bulgaria has not decreased over the last 10 years[16]
- Dobrich ranks second among the regions with the highest relative share of the poor, ESC data show[17]

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April

- ESC will analyse the interaction between civil society organisations and institutions in times of crisis[18]
- The Economic and Social Council welcomes the drawing up of an Action Plan on Labour Migration for 2024 and insists on its swift implementation[19]
- ESC insists on accelerating the digitalisation of all processes related to the employment of third-country nationals[20]
- We are importing labour from other countries[21]
- Commercial attachés can work to attract highly qualified personnel from third countries to Bulgaria, believes a deputy minister[22]
- Ministry of Economy and Industry: Easing the long processing times for work documents[23]
- ESC: Social dialogue is the voice of business, the voice of the trade unions, the voice of Bulgaria[24]
- Business reports huge losses from our not being in the euro area[25]
- Inflation must be brought under control at all costs, despite political turmoil[26]
- Scientists and experts discuss economic growth opportunities and business prospects at a forum in Sofia[27]

May

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- In times of crises and wars in Europe, there is an ever greater need for us to uphold EU values[28]
- Expert on the European vote: A strong campaign is needed to motivate young people to vote[29]
- New resolution on Bulgaria's accession to the euro area points out some shortcomings of the State[30]
- Wage growth of 80–120% within 6–7 years if Bulgaria becomes part of the euro area? The President of the ESC pointed to four important factors[31]

June

- Bulgaria will gain a lot from joining the euro area[32]
- The future of professions in the green and digital era[33]
- ESC adopted three documents related to energy and the labour market in the country
- Bulgaria is not using its potential in the green transition[34]
- We need a clear plan for how to cope with the digital and green transformation[35]
- ESC has adopted more than 15 acts related to the green transition, the organisation announced[36]
- ESC signed a memorandum of cooperation with "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" University[37]

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- A national strategy is needed for the development of sectors and regions affected by the low-carbon economy, said BIA President Dobri Mitrev[38]
- Green Transition: Without people and industry there is no way we can achieve the Green Transition[39]
- Experts discussed the challenges for jobs in the context of the green and digital era[40]

July

- The Convention on the promotion of collective bargaining should be ratified by law, states an analysis by the Economic and Social Council[41]
- ESC proposes that measures be taken to protect household consumers in the liberalisation of the electricity market[42]
- Will electricity become more expensive for household consumers after liberalisation?[43]

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- The measures ahead of the liberalisation of the electricity market must be taken now[44]

August

- A number of challenges facing social enterprises – what policy is needed?[45]
- Concrete measures are needed to relieve energy-poor households[46]
- Bogomil Nikolov: It is still not clear how many household consumers are energy poor[47]
- Elitsa Barakova, ESC: Social enterprises suffer from all the challenges facing small businesses in Bulgaria (focus-news.net)
- Elitsa Barakova, ESC: Social enterprises suffer from all the challenges facing small businesses in Bulgaria (varna24.bg)
- Elitsa Barakova, ESC: Social enterprises suffer from all the challenges facing small businesses in Bulgaria (sofia24.bg)
- Do people with disabilities find employment?[48]
- ESC recommends an urgent launch of an economic procedure under the OP "Human Resources Development"[49]
- The green and digital transformation should be a focus in the preparation of changes concerning social enterprises, believes the President of the Economic and Social Council, Zornitsa Rusinova[50]

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- Changes in the price of electricity are forthcoming – what are the risks for consumers?[51]
- What are the risks for households after the liberalisation of the electricity market?[52]
- Expert warns: We can expect difficult times for households if measures are not taken[53]
- The euro will not drastically raise prices or devalue our salaries[54]
- How to protect the energy poor from the liberalisation of electricity[55]
- We urgently need to introduce equal pay in Bulgaria[56]

September

- ESC recommended measures for realigning education towards the applicability of knowledge[57]
- 75% of employers find it difficult to recruit staff[58]
- The Economic and Social Council recommends promoting lifelong learning[59]

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- Education and practice[60]
- BNT TOPIC: Inequalities in education and their impact on the labour market in Bulgaria
- The economic benefits of Schengen accession are for the whole European Union[61]
- A more serious information campaign on the euro is needed in Bulgaria[62]
- Bulgaria is among the EU leaders in the percentage of young people who are neither in education nor in employment[63]
- Representatives of institutions and experts discussed how people with disabilities can have a successful career[64]

October

- ESC: The State must have a plan for dealing with this technological revolution[65]
- Ina Agafonova: Artificial intelligence will have an ever-growing impact on the economy and the labour market in Bulgaria - Money.bg[66]
- The Bulgarian market will be transformed by AI[67]
- Artificial intelligence is changing the labour market: the recommendation is to invest in training - Our Topic (bnr.bg)
- The introduction of artificial intelligence will not lead to a reduction in wages[68]
- AI can help businesses facing staff shortages[69]
- Bulgaria has less than 2 years to harmonise its legislation on artificial intelligence[70]

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- More and more companies in Bulgaria are relying on both the human factor and technology[71]
- Europe is lagging behind in terms of competitiveness, said the President of the Economic and Social Council[72]
- Is it time for Europe to tackle over-regulation, and does Bulgaria have the necessary funding for start-ups?[73]
- What motivates Bulgarian voters[74]
- ESC with recommendations on AI and the labour market: the State should take an active role in training workers[75]
- 70% of companies in Bulgaria are ready to introduce AI[76]
- Our pension system was designed for a different demography and economy; merely raising the contribution is not a solution[77]

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- The second edition of the "Democratic Mosaic" festival opened with a discussion on civil society in Bulgaria[78]
- Pernik will host a two-day national youth conference[79]

November

- The Economic and Social Council is working on a detailed analysis of the pension system[80]
- The pension model in Bulgaria in the light of a new analysis[81]
- In future pensions: higher contributions and the scrapping of the "COVID supplement"[82]
- Admission to the euro area is among the main factors for Bulgaria's economic prosperity, said the President of the ESC[83]
- A worrying price forecast. One sector will be hit hard[84]
- ESC: Climate change is an increasingly serious challenge to the competitiveness of Bulgarian agriculture[85]

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- Climate is putting pressure on Bulgarian agriculture[86]
- Hailstorms and droughts are destroying our agricultural crops[87]
- Natalia Shukadarova: Labour shortages and European requirements will deal a financial blow to Bulgarian agriculture[88]
- Natalia Shukadarova: Agricultural producers have their backs to the wall[89]
- Evgeni Ivanov: We must not remain silent, we must be united[90]
- The Economic and Social Council criticises the bill on foreign agents[91]
- ESC reacts sharply against the "Vazrazhdane" bill on foreign agents[92]
- We cannot keep cutting expenditure; we need investment[93]

December

- ESC: The Foreign Agents Act should not be put on Parliament's agenda[94]
- Budget expert: Abrupt political decisions not based on calculations are the most dangerous[95]
- Energy, healthcare, demography, finance, entrepreneurship and education were the topics of the fourth edition of the "Powers Summit" forum[96]

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[92] https://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/102079298

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- The introduction of multi-funds could double the second pension[97]
- ESC with recommendations on how the South-West region can receive fair European funding and how the pension system can be improved[98]
- Following a serious regional imbalance: an urgent change in regional division is called for[99]
- Assoc. Prof. Dr Milena Angelova: Kyustendil, Pernik and Blagoevgrad need to be freed from the burden of the economic development of Sofia City[100]
- Sofia City distorts the economic indicators of the entire region[101]
- The Economic and Social Council adopted an analysis of the pension system and recommendations for its improvement[102]
- ESC with recommendations for changes to the pension model in Bulgaria[103]
- Key document for reforming the pension system adopted[104]
- New analysis of pensions recommends regular increases in contributions[105]
- ESC raises the alarm: Bulgaria will not be able to maintain the levels of pension adequacy achieved[106]
- New reforms in the pension system: how will they affect pensions?[107]
- 63% of working pensioners work for the money, and 31% because they enjoy it[108]

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[107] https://www.iskra.bg/novi-reformi-v-pensionnata-sistema-kak-shte-se-otrazyat-na-pensiite/

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- ESC: The second and third pillars of the pension model in Bulgaria need to be improved[109]
- Is such a sweeping change to pensions really being prepared in Bulgaria?[110]

VI. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE ACTS OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL ADOPTED IN 2024

For more than 20 years, the ESC has been establishing and upholding the direct participation of organised civil society in decision-making processes, contributing to the economic and social development of society and to the consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria.

The significance and importance of the ESC's acts for the executive and legislative authorities stem from the fact that they put forward recommendations for the implementation of reforms and policies which are based on consensus among employers, trade unions and civil society organisations. Through its acts, the ESC takes part in the implementation of all reforms of importance to the country and makes its contribution through opinions, resolutions and analyses on topics of significance to society.

The significance of the ESC's expert positions is also confirmed by the growing number of referrals from the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Chair of the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers under Article 5(1) of the ESC Act. The six acts proposed for drafting by the Council concerned some of the most important and contentious topics for society, which require a consensus position of the representatives of employers, workers and civil society organisations.

The ESC's own-initiative acts set out the consistent and consensus-based position of the representatives of organised civil society on topics of priority for Bulgaria's development.

During the reporting period, too, the ESC focused its efforts on proposing sustainable policies and solutions that respond to the challenges arising from the series of social, economic and political crises. The aim was for the Council, through its acts, to present

[109] https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/102090905/zornica-rusinova ; https://www.iskra.bg/ekspert-povishavaneto-samo-na-minimalnata-pensiya-izkrivyava-modela-i-narushava-pravata/; https://zarata.info/вторият-и-третият-стълб-на-пенсионния/

[110] https://blitz.bg/ikonomika/gotvi-li-se-naistina-takava-grandiozna-promyana-s-pensiite-v-blgariya_news1056681.html

consistent, pragmatic and adequate recommendations to the executive and legislative authorities.

In the dynamic political environment, the consensus position of organised civil society on topics of importance to society is increasingly valued. The reflection of the ESC's recommendations by both the legislative and the executive authorities attests to the growing role and authority of organised civil society.

Results and effects of the ESC acts adopted in 2024:

- **"Analysis of the causes, factors and trends for the formation and scope of the group of so-called 'in-work poverty'. Recommendations and proposals for legislative changes to limit this phenomenon.", drawn up at the proposal of the 49th National Assembly – adopted at the Plenary Session on 23.02.2024.**

The analysis presents the consensus opinion of organised civil society on the causes, factors and trends behind the existence and scope of the group of the so-called "working poor", and sets out recommendations and proposals for legislative changes to limit this phenomenon. The analysis was discussed at numerous events before representatives of the legislative and executive authorities and stakeholders. The quality of the analysis benefited from the fact that a discussion was held with Members of Parliament at an early stage regarding their expectations as to the structure and scope of the analysis. At a regular meeting of the National Assembly's Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy on 17.01.2024, ESC representatives and Members of Parliament discussed important elements of the analysis – the causes and factors behind the expanding scope of the group of the "working poor".

In this act, the ESC puts forward specific proposals for solutions, formulated by consensus through debate among the representatives of the three groups of the Council. The proposals can serve as a basis on which representatives of the executive and legislative authorities can hold a public debate and proceed to implement specific measures to overcome the "working poor" phenomenon. Owing to the dynamic political situation, no action was taken during the year to implement the specific recommendations for improving the legislative framework.

An important result of the active presentation of the analysis to the media, institutions and at public events has been to draw public attention to the issue of overcoming the "working poor" phenomenon.

The analysis was also presented on the EESC platform for the exchange of information between the European Economic and Social Committee and all economic and social councils of the EU Member States and similar institutions.

➢ **"Analysis on the possibilities of simplifying and speeding up the procedures for the import of workers and highly qualified personnel from third countries for the needs of Bulgarian business", drawn up at the proposal of the Council of Ministers – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.04.2024.**

The ESC, as a consultative body representing the consensus opinion of employers' organisations, workers' organisations and civil society, succeeded in responding to the needs of institutions and businesses for finding effective solutions to simplify and speed up the procedures for the import of skilled labour from third countries. Representatives of the executive authorities were actively involved from the stage of drafting the analysis in committee, as well as in the discussion and adoption of the act at the Plenary Session. As a result of the effective coordination and consistency achieved between the ESC and the competent institutions, a large part of the analysis's recommendations were reflected in the bills prepared:

Bill amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, reference No 50-402-01-7 of 04.07.2024, submitted to the National Assembly by the Council of Ministers:

- the bill provides for additions that ensure and allow the functioning of the single online platform for the processing and issuing of work permits, which has already been built by the Ministry of e-Government;
- the bill provides for changes based on recommendations from the employers' group to improve the conditions of access of third-country nationals to the Bulgarian labour market, including: for applicants for an EU Blue Card, the address is to be provided upon the foreigner's arrival, when he or she submits the application for the issuing of the residence card; extension – up to 30 days – of the deadline for applying

for a long-stay visa (type D visa); a possibility and procedure for changing the worker's position within the company for holders of an "EU Blue Card"; amendments to the provisions on the procedure for changing employer during the first 12 months and after the expiry of the first 12 months for holders of "EU Blue Card" permits; as well as a possibility of health insurance for seasonal workers and holders of a "single permit for residence and work".

Bill amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, reference No 50-454-01-71 of 08.08.2024, submitted to the National Assembly by MP Bozhidar Bozhanov and a group of Members of Parliament – the bill provides for additions that ensure and allow the functioning of the single online platform for the processing and issuing of work permits, which has already been built by the Ministry of e-Government.

The Act amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, adopted on 25.04.2024 and promulgated in State Gazette No 39/30.04.2024, provides for the possibility of extending the period of stay of foreigners performing seasonal work for a period of up to 90 days who have entered on a short-stay visa.

➢ **"Updated analysis of the demographic and socio-economic development of the planning regions – results and state of play", drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

The analysis of the demographic and socio-economic development of the planning regions, drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria in 2022, and more specifically the recommendations made by the ESC, as a consultative body, to the legislative and executive authorities with a view to overcoming the demographic crisis the country has been experiencing for more than 20 years, aroused considerable media and public interest. A testament to the quality and expertise of the document is the proposal received from the President to update the analysis this year.

The Council's understanding is that the demographic and socio-economic situation of the planning regions in Bulgaria is a function of multiple factors and processes, and that

overcoming the negative trends and disparities in and between the planning regions requires the implementation of a horizontal integrated demographic policy comprising sustainable, long-term, systematic, interconnected and socially acceptable measures. Organising a broad public discussion on the role, importance and potential of well-planned urbanisation for sustainable social development and economic growth, for an even distribution of economic resources across the country and for improving and bringing closer the quality of life in towns and villages is among the Council's main recommendations.

The main conclusions and recommendations of the analysis were presented to the President's team, to representatives of the executive and legislative authorities in the framework of official and working meetings, to representatives of local authorities during the conference of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB), and to the academic community and civil society. At the international conference "Demography – Migration – Labour Markets" in Athens, organised by the Greek ESC and AICESIS, the President of the ESC presented the conclusions of two analyses and stressed that topics such as the birth rate, the labour market, the pension system, long-term care, education and healthcare are only some of the policies on which the State must act actively. The ESC's recommendations include measures to improve access for people in small settlements to quality healthcare, education, transport and communications and administrative services, as well as measures for income growth towards average European levels.

- **"Analysis of inequalities in education and their impact on the labour market in Bulgaria. Solutions for readjusting the education system towards the applicability of knowledge and the development of social skills" (BG), drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria – adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024.**

The analysis is the latest act on the subject of education proposed for drafting by the ESC under Article 4(1), point 5 of the Economic and Social Council Act, and is a demonstration of the high regard for the work of the ESC as a consultative

body representing organised civil society. The document consistently builds on the conclusions and recommendations of the opinion on "Necessary amendments and supplements to the Vocational Education and Training Act. Introduction and possible approaches to implementing in national practice the Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts and the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability", drawn up in 2023 at the proposal of the Council of Ministers. The analysis outlines the role of organised civil society as a partner of the institutions in finding consensus-based solutions to challenges in the field of education. According to the analysis, educational inequalities are found in Bulgaria which are due both to income inequalities and to other factors. The members of the ESC acknowledge the considerable efforts made and the real measures taken to overcome to a significant extent the effects of such inequalities, especially within compulsory basic education.

- **"Analysis of the expected effects of artificial intelligence on the labour market in Bulgaria. Proposals for concrete measures to overcome the problems", drawn up at the proposal of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria – adopted at the Plenary Session on 04.10.2024.**

Over the last six years, the ESC has systematically studied the challenges, trends, transformation and development of digitalisation in Bulgaria and has drawn up acts that track the effects of digitalisation and the impact of artificial intelligence on various spheres, with a focus on the impact on the labour market. The proposal from the Presidency to draw up this analysis with proposals for concrete measures is a recognition of the expertise accumulated on the subject by the representatives of organised civil society.

In the analysis, the representatives of organised civil society noted that the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence will require serious organisational efforts. The Regulation requires the adoption of primary and secondary legislation, as well as the establishment of new state regulatory authorities and of

units of experts with special knowledge at employers operating in high-risk areas (within the meaning of the Regulation).

The conclusions and recommendations of the analysis aroused great interest on the EESC platform for the exchange of information between the European Economic and Social Committee and all economic and social councils of the EU Member States, and similar institutions.

➢ **"Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement", drawn up at the proposal of the 49th National Assembly – adopted at the Plenary Session on 13.12.2024.**

The complexity of the topic of the "Analysis of the current pension system and proposals for its improvement", proposed by the Chair of the 49th National Assembly, called for a long period to draw up a thorough, high-quality document. In the period from the proposal of the analysis – 28.08.2023 – to its adoption by the Plenary Session of the Economic and Social Council on 13.12.2024, numerous working and coordination meetings on the drafting of the analysis were held with representatives of the legislative and executive authorities, as well as experts from institutions and representatives of stakeholders. ESC experts assisted the survey of the National Centre for Parliamentary Research at the National Assembly entitled "Survey of public attitudes on updating the existing pension system". Representatives of the Council took part in the presentation of the results of the survey during a meeting of the National Assembly's Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy on 24 April 2024.

The analysis was prepared in conditions of active communication with the executive and legislative authorities, the competent institutions and the professional community.

During the period in which the document was being drawn up, the representatives of the Economic and Social Council were sought-after participants in numerous forums on the subject, which clearly demonstrated the importance, for the executive and legislative authorities as well as for the expert community, of the independent opinion of employers, trade unions and civil society organisations on the development of the pension system and the necessary reforms. Examples of this were two specialised events at which the competent institutions and the professional community

confirmed their readiness to take account of the ESC's recommendations and to work together with the Council's experts:

- The "Pension forum on issues related to pension insurance. Where next?", organised by the Bulgarian Actuarial Society on 8 November 2024, was attended by more than 90 experts in the field of pension insurance – actuaries, financial analysts, representatives of the academic community, the National Social Security Institute (NSSI), the Financial Supervision Commission (FSC) and pension funds.
- A panel discussion on "Investment and Social Security – development of the three-pillar pension model" during the Powers Summit at Sofia Tech Park on 10 December 2024. The forum brings together representatives of employers' organisations, sectoral and industrial associations, together with representatives of institutions and civil society.
- A presentation of the analysis is planned in the National Assembly, with a discussion with Members of Parliament of the findings and conclusions regarding the current pension system, as well as the proposals derived for its improvement.

➢ **Resolution "National Just Transition Plan – a key instrument for implementing the transition to a climate-neutral economy" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.**

In its resolution on the "National Just Transition Plan – a key instrument for implementing the transition to a climate-neutral economy" (BG), the ESC stressed that it is essential for the National Just Transition Plan (NJTP) to include an up-to-date map of existing jobs and skills in each sector, leading to adequate labour market planning.

In response to this recommendation, although no NJTP has yet been adopted, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) and the trade union organisations are implementing, under the "Human Resources Development" Programme, the project "Carrying out a survey to identify and map the available skills and the development attitudes of persons employed in thermal power plants and coal mines in the regions of Stara Zagora, Kyustendil and Pernik".

In the resolution, the ESC also pointed out that the preparation of the NJTP must be accompanied by the adoption of a national programme to compensate workers and employees

affected by the closure of thermal power plants and mines, and workers left without alternative employment. As a result, the Ministry of Energy has prepared a bill that is due to be submitted to the National Assembly.

The position of the ESC expressed in the act is that the main objective of the National Just Transition Plan is to ensure a smooth transformation of the economy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, on the basis of an analysis of the impact the transition will have on the most affected sectors – energy, residential buildings, transport, industry and agriculture – and with clear commitments by the State towards workers and employees whose jobs will be affected as a result of the transformation of the sector concerned. Such plans for the strategic restructuring of the affected companies have begun to be drawn up in the energy sector.

- **"Analysis of the interaction between civil society organisations and national and local institutions in response to and in times of crisis" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.**

Following its publication, the analysis was also disseminated among the members of the Bulgarian Donors' Forum and of the Council for the Development of Civil Society – a consultative body to the Council of Ministers. Despite the active promotion of the act and the emphasis placed on the role and importance of civil society organisations, especially in times of crisis, the finding is that the recommendations have not been adequately reflected in the institutions' responses to the current crises. The interaction of organised civil society with institutions, the academic and other professional communities or business has never been an end in itself. The ESC analysis demonstrated the practical applicability of effective models of interaction and the effect achieved when efforts and resources are pooled in response to public needs and requirements. This is an extremely important topic that affects the development of civil society, democracy and freedom of association.

- **"Analysis of Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work**

of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 25.03.2024.

In accordance with Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the analysis was sent to the institutions concerned for their information, together with a proposal to organise a public debate with the participation of all stakeholders, at which the conclusions and recommendations set out in the act would be presented and discussed.

Transposition of the Directive must be completed by 07.06.2026 (Article 34), i.e. in nearly two years' time. This is a relatively short period of time in which to clarify, discuss and prepare legislative amendments of considerable scope and effect, some of which have the potential to set different interests against each other and have no equivalent in existing legislation and practice, and in which these amendments must also go through the statutory procedures for their adoption, including by the National Assembly.

The main objective of the analysis is to support the effective and correct transposition of the Directive by revealing its content and substance and drawing attention to those provisions that have no equivalent in our national legislation.

- **Analysis "European requirements and perspectives for cyber resilient Bulgaria" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.04.2024.**

In accordance with Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the analysis was sent to the institutions concerned for their information, together with a proposal to organise a public debate with the participation of all stakeholders, at which the conclusions and recommendations set out in the act would be presented and discussed.

One of the recommendations in the act called for the urgent transposition of the Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS2 Directive). To this end, ESC representatives took an active part in the public debate, which supported the adequate transposition of the Directive and the preparation of a bill on cybersecurity; however, owing to political instability and the frequent elections held in the country, the law has not yet been adopted. Members of the Council took part in numerous events, presenting the act and its conclusions.

➢ **Resolution "Bulgaria's Accession to the Euro Area" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

The document is a natural continuation of the acts drawn up by the Economic and Social Council in 2017 and 2022 in support of the process of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area. In addition, in October 2023 the ESC also drew up a resolution "On Bulgaria's membership of the euro area". All this demonstrates consistency in the Council's work and its commitment to the process of full membership of the Economic and Monetary Union.

The ESC systematically focuses its efforts on providing expert support to the process of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area. The acts and events on the subject are aimed both at supporting the country's technical preparation and at raising public awareness and combating disinformation on the subject.

The ESC's acts on the subject establish the Council's position as the only independent body to have provided Bulgarian society with an objective analysis of the impact of the introduction of the single European currency on incomes, inflation and economic development. In its resolution, the ESC once again highlights the fact that the social partners are among the most active participants in the process of informing the public about the benefits and challenges of euro area membership. A series of discussion forums, conferences and information meetings were organised.

In 2024, too, the ESC continued to conduct an expert discussion on the subject with representatives of the executive authorities and a wide range of responsible institutions, in the form of public lectures and discussions hosted by university centres. The active expert information campaign that the ESC has been conducting on the subject over the last three years has been highly appreciated by representatives of the Government, the National Assembly, the President and the diplomatic community in the country.

➢ **Opinion "The European Semester in Bulgaria – challenges and opportunities" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.05.2024.**

The opinion places a firm focus on the need for active and effective involvement of organised civil society throughout the entire European Semester cycle. It highlights the role of organised civil society in the discussion of national reforms and the investment for their implementation, as well as in monitoring the implementation of the recommendations to Bulgaria, so that our country can achieve upward economic and social convergence and ensure conditions for economic growth, a marked improvement in the educational and health profile of the population, a reduction in poverty and inequalities and an overall increase in the well-being of the nation.

The ESC took an active part in the working discussions and online meetings organised by the EESC with the national economic and social councils to prepare the position of the European Economic and Social Committee for the European Semester Group meeting, which serves as an interinstitutional debate.

The 33rd European Semester Group meeting, held on 9 December 2024 in Brussels, aimed to discuss the European Semester Autumn Package. The President of the ESC took part in the debate and presented the ESC's position on the need for the active participation of organised civil society at all stages of the European Semester cycle.

➢ **"Analysis of the operating conditions and opportunities for coal-fired power plants in the transformation of coal regions towards low-carbon energy" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

The analysis on "The operating conditions and opportunities for coal-fired power plants in the transformation of coal regions towards low-carbon energy" showed the need for administrative measures to ensure the operation of coal-fired thermal power plants in conditions of high exchange prices and high demand for electricity in the region. These measures should be maintained until reliable alternative sources of electricity are secured in the region. A telling example of this is the need to continue the practice of operating with a regulated market quota for the Maritsa East 2 thermal power plant. At the

same time, most of the coal-fired power plants have also announced their investment intentions to develop low-carbon energy, which undoubtedly also requires adequate solutions on the part of those in government to support the successful implementation of such projects. The unstable political situation, as well as the delay in implementing the main strategic documents and the risk of losing the European funding needed to develop low-carbon energy, are jeopardising the implementation of the main recommendations of the analysis.

- **"Analysis of ILO Convention No 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the analysis was sent to the relevant institutions for their information, as well as with a view to organising a public debate involving all stakeholders to discuss the conclusions and recommendations set out in the act.

The analysis reflects the ESC's consistent position on the subject, recalling the ESC's positive stance on the need to ratify ILO Convention No 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining, as expressed in its previous acts: "Analysis of the Current State of Wages in Bulgaria – Conclusions and Recommendations", adopted in 2022, and the opinion "Approaches to Drawing up an Action Plan for the Promotion of Collective Bargaining in Bulgaria", adopted in 2023.

In implementation of the recommendations of the previous acts, a Working Group on the transposition of the EU Minimum Wage Directive was set up at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, divided into two subgroups to work on the following two topics: a working group dealing with collective bargaining and a working group on the minimum wage.

The Interdepartmental Working Group under the Minister of Labour and Social Policy for the transposition of the Directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union met during 2024. Its main objective was to draw up a proposal for draft amendments to the Labour Code (and, where necessary, to other legislative acts) through which changes would be introduced into Bulgarian legislation in line with the European directive and national socio-economic conditions.

➢ **Opinion "Strategic Planning in Bulgaria – Challenges and Opportunities for a Green and Digital Transition" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 17.06.2024.**

The ESC identified the green and digital transition as a key priority during its current term of office and is actively involved in the process of shaping policies aimed at supporting the transformation of the economy and society. The acts of the Economic and Social Council demonstrate the important role of organised civil society in overcoming challenges and shaping policies during this exceptionally turbulent period for our country. The ESC placed an emphasis on the use of strategic planning in Bulgaria. Its accumulated experience, expertise and achievements enable the Council, through its acts, to provide guidance for improving the process of policy planning, implementation and monitoring. In its opinion on strategic planning, as well as in its resolution on the updated Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (BG), the ESC points to weaknesses in the procedures for developing strategic documents in the country and alerts the state authorities to the need to apply an effective public consultation process. The opinion raises important issues and is aimed at increasing the capacity of organisations to participate in strategic planning, as well as at supporting the work of social dialogue bodies.

➢ **Resolution on the Updated Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (BG) – drawn up by the President's Council and, following written approval by the ESC members, submitted within the deadline (26.06.2024) to the public consultation on the INECP.**

Issues related to the transformation of the energy sector are at the focus of the Council's work. Over the last two years, the ESC has adopted more than 10 acts concerning European and national legislative initiatives and strategic documents that are directly relevant to the transition to low-carbon energy. The challenges we face, as well as the high ambitions to achieve an accelerated yet just green and digital transition, are an argument for the Council to continue to support the legislative and executive authorities through its acts, consultations and forums, and to uphold the position of organised civil society in the implementation of energy reforms.

The update of the INECP, the latest version of which dates from 10.09.2024, has been submitted to the EC for information. The EC insists on the submission of a final version adopted by decision of a high-level state authority. In this sense, the EC services are still relying on the preliminary draft submitted at the end of 2023, on which the EC issued official recommendations for amendment. The INECP is directly linked to the implementation of applied measures both under the TJTP and under other programmes, such as payments in the agricultural sector or the absorption of funds under the Modernisation Fund. In this context, it would be useful for the technical document already prepared to be published on the website of the Ministry of Energy for the purposes of broad analysis and adaptation of businesses to the development lines identified. The main obstacle to submitting a final version, even though the modelling has already been completed and there are well-founded results, is the lack of an Environmental Assessment. This can be prepared in 2026 at the earliest.

The Resolution of the Economic and Social Council on the updated draft Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (BG) was drawn up within the public consultation process and was sent to all competent national institutions and to the EC. Among the main recommendations of the resolution, which represent the consensus view of the three groups in the Council, are the abandonment of ambitious energy transition models associated with excessively high investment costs, as well as making industrial competitiveness and the well-being of households in the country a national priority. The resolution has become the basis for discussions within advisory councils and working meetings between stakeholders.

➢ **Analysis "The Free Electricity Market: Problems and Challenges, Measures to Improve Energy Efficiency and Support for the Households" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.07.2024.**

The ESC analysis received wide media coverage and helped to foster a more active public debate on the forthcoming liberalisation, also proposing specific measures that the institutions need to take both before and after the liberalisation is carried out. The data from the analysis are also being

used to shape political positions in discussions on the subject, including in the National Assembly.

At a discussion forum held on 26 November 2024, organised by CL "Podkrepa" and attended by national federations from various economic sectors, the data included in the analysis and the main conclusions and recommendations of the ESC were presented, on the basis of which a common position of the forum participants was formed.

A common position of the trade unions is to be drawn up on the liberalisation of the energy market for household consumers and the necessary measures to be taken before and after its implementation, which will again draw on the data and key messages of the ESC analysis.

The analysis will continue to bring added value to all participants in the debate on this topical issue for society as a whole. The document may serve as a basis for initiating an in-depth discussion at European level on the model for setting wholesale prices on European electricity exchanges and the possibilities for changing it.

- **Opinion "Accelerating the Development of the Social Economy in Bulgaria in Response to Contemporary Challenges" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.07.2024.**

The opinion sets out the ESC's position on the importance of the social and solidarity economy for Bulgaria, both in terms of the country's economic development and in terms of solving important social problems, including by harnessing civic energy and business initiative.

As early as during the discussion of the opinion at the Plenary Session of the Economic and Social Council, representatives of the executive took part in the debate, in the person of Natalia Efremova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, who explained that she regarded this document as a positive and additional impetus for the development of social economy policy. Nikolay Pavlov, Deputy Minister of Economy and Industry, also took part in the discussion and stated that the opinion was entirely timely and relevant.

Pursuant to Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the opinion was sent to the competent institutions not only for information, but also with a proposal to organise a public debate involving all stakeholders to discuss the conclusions and recommendations set out in the act.

The ESC presented the conclusions and recommendations of the opinion at events before representatives of the legislative and executive authorities and stakeholders:

- at the "Day of the Children of the Social Enterprises Family" on 3 June 2023;
- at the conference "Social Finance Instruments in Bulgaria" on 20 November 2024;
- on the EESC platform for the exchange of information between the European Economic and Social Committee and all economic and social councils of the EU Member States and similar institutions.

➢ **ESC Resolution on Bulgaria's Accession to the OECD (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024.**

Pursuant to Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the resolution was sent to the competent institutions not only for information, but also with a proposal to organise a public debate involving all stakeholders with a view to speeding up the process of preparing the country for full membership of the OECD.

The resolution was actively presented in the media, with the aim of focusing public attention on the positive effects on socio-economic development of our country's full participation in the so-called "Rich Countries' Club", including on key non-monetary effects.

The recommendations made by the Council are aimed at speeding up the process of updating and adapting national strategic documents and the regulatory framework, as well as speeding up the necessary institutional reforms, so that our country can meet the indicative deadline – the end of 2025.

➢ **Opinion "Problems and Challenges to the Competitiveness of Bulgarian Agricultural Producers" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 20.11.2024.**

The subject addressed in the opinion is of exceptional importance not only for the agricultural sector, but for Bulgarian society as a whole. The conclusions and recommendations were presented both at specialised forums and in the media, in order to focus public interest on these important issues.

Following the adoption of the opinion in question, the National Association of Grain Producers adopted a Declaration in which it designates the "Grain Production" sector as strategic for the national economy, food security and sustainable development of Bulgaria. In its Declaration, the NAGP calls for the inclusion of the following key items in the 2025 State Budget, which are of crucial importance for the stability of the sector:

- funds for the State aid "Aid to support the liquidity of farmers producing cereals and oilseeds to overcome the negative economic impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine";
- funds for the restoration and construction of strategic facilities of the country's hydro-melioration sector in accordance with the four-year plan proposed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) for engineering (design and construction – reconstruction, restoration, modernisation and new construction) of irrigation infrastructure sites and for carrying out reforms for the efficient and sustainable use of the country's water resources by reducing water losses in hydro-melioration facilities;
- funds for the State aid "Aid to support the cost of irrigation water for growing agricultural crops".

The National Organisation of Grain Producers calls for the implementation of legislative initiatives related to improving the possibilities for carrying out agricultural activities, namely: amendments to the Agricultural Land Lease Act aimed at regulating the conclusion of long-term contracts for the rental/lease of agricultural land; the adoption of a State mechanism for regulating rent payments

in the country based on yields and selling prices; the drafting and adoption of an Act on Sectoral Organisations in Agriculture, an Agricultural Chamber Act and an Agricultural Cooperatives Act; designating irrigation as a strategic national priority; and easing the regulatory regimes for investment projects related to water-saving technologies.

➢ **ESC Declaration on the Draft Law on the Registration of Foreign Agents (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 11.09.2024, and ESC Resolution on the Draft Law on the Registration of Foreign Agents (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 20.11.2024.**

On the basis of the adopted ESC Declaration on the Draft Law on the Registration of Foreign Agents (BG), and taking into account the importance of representatives of organised civil society stating their position clearly and with reasoned arguments, the ESC continued its work on a document that examines in detail the contradictions between the draft law and the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria and the requirements of national legislation (incl. the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA); the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act (NPLEA); the Measures Against Money Laundering Act (MAMLA); the Radio and Television Act (RTA); the Investment Promotion Act (IPA); the Commerce Act; the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code, etc.), as well as international legal norms (incl. the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU); the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU); and UN international standards).

In its resolution, the Council sets out, with reasoned arguments, the potential negative effects of the proposed regulations on the socio-economic development of the country, incl. the risks of reduced foreign investment and restricted international cooperation, particularly in sectors that are key to the country's innovation and economic development. In addition, the potential effects on the fundamental democratic values in Bulgaria are also presented, incl. the free expression of the will of citizens and economic operators, political and civic participation, freedom of

association, freedom of expression and protection of private life, the protection of human rights and human dignity, as well as on culture, education, healthcare and business.

Pursuant to Article 5(4) of the ESC Act, the resolution was sent to the legislative and executive authorities, to the ambassadors of the EU Member States and of the USA, to the EC and the EP, as well as to the EESC, not only for information, but also with a proposal to organise a public debate to discuss the potential risks of adopting such a legislative act. On 21.11.2024, the ESC presented its position at the conference "Business and Civil Society: Partners for a Better Environment", organised by the CEIBG and the America for Bulgaria Foundation, with the support of a large number of business and civil society organisations.

➢ **Opinion "Planning Regions in the Republic of Bulgaria at NUTS 2 Level" (BG) – adopted at the Plenary Session on 13.12.2024.**

The subject of the opinion is of particular importance for the economic development of the country, as evidenced by the active participation of representatives of the executive in the drafting and adoption of the act. The conclusions and proposals made, as well as the options presented in the annex to the opinion, were positively received by the competent ministries and institutions. The recommendations were presented in the media in order to focus public interest on the subject, and representatives of the ESC were also included in the thematic working group at the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW).

➢ **Opinion "Stimulation Policies for Bulgaria's Catch-Up Economic Growth" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 19.12.2024.**

The opinion can provide a sound basis for organising public discussions, to which the institutions concerned would be invited, with the aim of presenting the main problems that Bulgaria faces if economic growth is to materialise:

- the strong dependence of our economy on foreign investment;
- the challenges facing our fiscal policy in the medium term;
- the need for strategic planning for catch-up GDP growth;
- the increasingly difficult process of catching up with the EU in terms of GDP per capita;

- the use of new instruments and mechanisms and the creation of new strategies for catching up with EU levels;
- avoiding excessive deficit spending and preventing the economy from entering a debt spiral.

Effects and results of acts adopted by the ESC in previous years:

➢ **Opinion "Necessary Amendments and Supplements to the Vocational Education and Training Act. Introduction and Possible Approaches to the Implementation in National Practice of the Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts and of the Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability", drawn up at the request of the Council of Ministers – adopted at the Plenary Session on 15.05.2023.**

On 14 March 2024, following successive debates with stakeholders during the discussion in the competent committees of the 49th National Assembly, the Act amending and supplementing the Vocational Education and Training Act (AASVETA) was adopted. The AASVETA incorporates the proposals set out in the ESC opinion for promoting lifelong learning and increasing the effectiveness of the education system in achieving quality employment.

➢ **Opinion "Energy, Water and Transport Poverty – Specific Features of Their Manifestation and Measures to Overcome Them" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 23.06.2023.**

The ESC continued to present the conclusions and recommendations of the opinion at national and international forums before representatives of the legislative and executive authorities, stakeholders and the academic community. On 4 October 2024, during the ESC Plenary Session, Lasse Melgaard, World Bank Resident Representative for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and Monica Robayo, Senior Economist at the World Bank, presented to the Plenary Session two of a package of policy working papers on the following topics: Developing a concept and measuring energy poverty in Bulgaria;

Simulating how changes in monthly social assistance and heating assistance in Bulgaria affect well-being. During the discussion, the conclusions and recommendations of the ESC opinion were discussed. The topics of energy, water and transport poverty continue to be at the forefront of public debate in Bulgarian society, particularly through the prism of the liberalisation of the electricity market, the role of climate change and the lack of infrastructure modernisation as the main factors responsible for water shortages in many regions.

➢ **Opinion "The European Care Strategy – Guidelines for Its Implementation in Bulgaria" – adopted at the Plenary Session on 24.03.2023.**

As a result of the active campaign conducted to present the main conclusions and recommendations of the act, the ESC was a sought-after partner in discussions on care policies together with representatives of the legislative and executive authorities, civil society organisations and the academic community. On 20 February 2024, representatives of the ESC took part in the conference "Challenges to Long-Term Care in the Western Balkans", organised by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, and presented the conclusions and recommendations of the opinion.

- Resolution on the Draft Act amending and supplementing the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act – adopted at the Plenary Session on 26.04.2022.

Following a series of shocking cases of domestic violence with fatal outcomes and broad public pressure, the legislature took urgent action to update the regulatory framework and drafted and adopted two successive, mutually complementary acts amending and supplementing the existing Protection Against Domestic Violence Act: the Act amending and supplementing the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act, adopted by the 49th National Assembly on 21 July 2023; and the Act amending and supplementing the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act, adopted by the 49th National Assembly on 7 August 2023.

The amendments adopted were in line with the ESC's proposals to take measures guaranteeing the right of every person to a life free from violence and from the threat of

violence. The ESC upholds the position that acts of domestic violence undermine the two fundamental values underpinning the idea of human rights – human dignity and equality.

The results of the legislation adopted have to be measured in the long term, but already within a year and a few months of the adoption of the legislative amendments there is evidence that the measures adopted are more than necessary. On 25 November 2024 – the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women – the Chief Directorate "National Police" announced that 4,320 protection orders against domestic violence had been issued since the beginning of 2024. More than 2,000 crimes related to domestic violence have been registered in the country since the beginning of the year, which is 54 per cent more than the previous year, according to the Ministry of Interior.

PRESIDENT:

ZORNITSA RUSINOVA