



# EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

February 2021 | EN



## [MFF: the good, the bad and the ugly](#)

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"The Grassroots View" podcast opens its second season with an episode dedicated to the new European Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Our four guests tell us what is the good, the bad and the ugly in this long-awaited agreement.

**Jan Olbrycht**, MEP and co-rapporteur on the MFF for the European Parliament, explains why the negotiations were so difficult and also underlines the importance of the new EU4Health programme.

**Stefano Palmieri**, president of the [ECO section](#) at the European Economic and Social Committee, sees the opportunity for modernising the European economic and social system. He sets out the vision of civil society together with two other speakers: **Gabriella Civico**, member of the Steering Committee of [Civil Society Europe](#), and **Zsuzsanna Szabó**, journalist and member of [Res Publica Foundation](#). They share similar concerns about the EU's own resources and the weakness of new Rule of Law conditionality mechanism.

(dm/na)

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## EDITORIAL



### [We applaud the courage and solidarity of Europe's civil society](#)

#### **We applaud the courage and solidarity of Europe's civil society**

Dear readers,

On 15 February we held the award ceremony for the laureates of our Civil Solidarity Prize, launched in July 2020 just as Europe was healing its wounds from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was shortly after the end of the first lockdowns, which had left us confined to our homes, watching media reports on heart-breaking scenes from Europe's hospitals and clapping for medical workers every evening.

But reports about acts of solidarity soon started pouring in from all over the EU, showing that many were not just sitting idly by, but running to help – be it to the most vulnerable among us, to those most affected by the crisis or in any other way needed.

For instance, they were making and distributing face masks and medical gowns, transforming hotels into emergency hospitals, supplying food to elderly or vulnerable people, providing digital support for home schooling or simply running art or entertainment projects to make pandemic life more bearable.

Civil society, through its organisations and people, was at the forefront of such actions. Without their help on the ground, the price paid for this pandemic would be much higher.

In an effort to give recognition to such enthusiastic engagement and work at grassroots level, in 2020 we decided to temporarily scrap our trademark Civil Society Prize, which we have awarded every year since 2006 to civil society organisations and individuals whose outstanding projects celebrate our European identity and our shared values in a particular field of work.

We replaced it with a unique, one-off Civil Solidarity Prize with the theme "Civil Society against COVID-19", specifically dedicated to the fight against coronavirus and its terrible consequences.

Instead of the usual five winners, we wanted to award this prize to up to 29 projects carried out by individuals, civil society organisations and companies. The projects had to be strictly not-for-profit and no more than 50% publicly funded. We were looking for one winner in each Member State and in the UK, as a gesture to show that we wanted to keep close ties with UK civil society despite the fact that the country was leaving the EU, plus one winner with a cross-border or pan-European focus.

The contest ended on 30 September, by which time we had received as many as 250 applications from across the EU. All our candidates were a demonstration of selfless citizen and civil society engagement on the ground. All the projects had solidarity as their driving force, but we grouped them under five main themes: food supply and assistance to vulnerable groups, medical equipment, advisory services, educational services and information on the pandemic and cultural offers.

After careful consideration we picked 23 winners spread across the five themes, who we think best represent what civil society is doing across Europe to help communities get through the pandemic. We awarded each of them EUR 10 000, and we hope that this financial incentive will help them further their work and that the prize will enhance the visibility of their projects.

We also hope to raise awareness of the importance not only of these projects but also of countless other significant and creative citizen initiatives taking place in the EU. They are all proving that solidarity is the key to overcoming any crisis. Through their work, they are building a better future for Europe, which will hopefully emerge from this ordeal stronger and more united.

Therefore, at our fully remote award ceremony on 15 February, it was not only our 23 winners that we applauded. We took our hats off to all of Europe's civil society and to so many of its organisations, companies and individuals who had shown and who keep showing unprecedented solidarity, courage and civic responsibility in these difficult and trying times.

**Cillian Lohan**

**Vice-President for communication**

## DIARY DATES

**1 - 5 March 2021, Brussels**

**Civil Society Days 2021**

**18 - 19 March 2021, Brussels**

**Your Europe, Your Say! 2021**

**24 - 25 March 2021, Brussels**

**EESC plenary session**

# ONE QUESTION TO...



## One question to...

**In our section "One question to..." we ask EESC members to respond to a topical question that seems to us to be particularly relevant.**

We asked **Peter Schmidt**, president of the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) to share with EESC Info readers his views on the culture of food and food consumption during the pandemic.

## The impact of COVID-19 on the food supply chain

**EESC info: Restaurants and bars have been closed during the pandemic. How does this situation affect food producers, suppliers, restaurant owners, the culture of food and food consumption? What is the best way to get people back to work?**

**Peter Schmidt, President NAT section:** Food producers, the food processing industry and food retailers are under pressure even in normal times. Everyone expects an adequate food supply of the highest quality around the clock.

The good news amid all the bad that the pandemic has brought is that Europe's food supply works well even in times of crisis! The food supply chain is arguably the one that has functioned best throughout the current crisis. There has not been one single moment when the food shelves in Europe's markets were empty.

However, the pandemic has pinpointed some weaknesses which had been overlooked before. I want to briefly highlight three of them.

One problem which soon became apparent concerned the employment of harvest workers in farming, and another was the structure of the meat industry.

In both cases, production relied on cheap labour, predominantly from eastern European countries and migrants (or third country nationals), with abuse of the free movement of workers in Europe and enormous price pressure on agricultural and food products.

The travel restrictions and lockdowns disrupted these supply chains. At the same time, the dire conditions in which these people lived and worked were exposed. Those conditions also led to chains of infection and outbreaks of the disease. In the case of the meat industry, this prompted the German government to adopt regulations to protect workers.

The third area of the food supply chain that is in massive trouble is the hotel and restaurant sector, and the entire tourism industry globally.

In most countries, hospitality businesses are closed due to bans, curfews, travel restrictions and shutdowns across the sector. Thousands of companies are struggling to survive or facing extinction.

Millions of workers are on furlough or retention programmes or have lost their jobs. Many hotel companies have started restructuring and laying off workers. The future of the sector is uncertain and the recovery likely to be long and difficult.

The following must be done as soon as possible:

- ensure swift adoption and implementation of the EU Recovery Plan: businesses and workers cannot wait any longer;
- place hospitality and tourism at the heart of national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs), involving the social partners in an effort to save as many jobs as possible, support the sector economically and strive for a swift, but safe and coordinated, recovery and ease of travel;
- extend all emergency measures such as short-time work schemes at least until September 2021, ensuring fair allowances for all workers, including seasonal and temporary workers;
- increase short-time allowance payments to 100 %;
- proper implementation and enforcement of applicable EU legislation as regards the rights of cross-border and seasonal workers, particularly the right to equal pay for equal work in the same place, including through national and cross-border concerted and joint labour inspections;
- pursue a new sustainable tourism model through the European Green Deal and the Farm-to-Fork strategy.

Any financial support such as state aid, loans or tax exemptions should only be granted to businesses which:

- safeguard employment/create decent jobs and uphold workers' rights and collective agreements;
- are not registered in tax havens and have always paid their fair share of taxes and social contributions;
- agree to suspend dividend payments, share buybacks and stock options during the crisis.

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# GUESS WHO IS OUR GUEST..



## Surprise guest

Each month we will be introducing a surprise guest – a public figure who will give us their take on current affairs and bring us a breath of fresh air to broaden our horizons, inspire us and raise our awareness of today's world. For this February's edition, we are delighted to welcome two personalities from different spheres — culture and the media — who can help us better understand what is happening around us and give us some inspiration. **Hélène Theunissen**, a stalwart of Belgian theatre and cinema, and **Nicolas Gros-Verheyde**, expert in and observer of European politics.

Actress, director and adapter of texts, **Hélène Theunissen** has, for more than thirty years, played nearly a hundred roles in most of Belgium's French-language theatres. She has also performed in France. She has directed and adapted around ten shows, most recently, *A midsummer night's dream* by William Shakespeare at the Théâtre des Martyrs, and

*The walls are whispering* by and with Babetida Sadjo, at the Théâtre Le Public in Brussels. She has appeared in several feature films, including *Girl* by Lukas Dhont, and has acted in the RTBF series *Unit 42* in Belgium.

**Nicolas Gros-Verheyde** is a French journalist and EU/NATO correspondent. He is known and respected in European circles for his extensive knowledge of European affairs and foreign policy. Correspondent for *Sud-Ouest* (formerly *Ouest France* and *France-Soir*), in 2008 he founded the online platform B2-Bruxelles2, the first French-language news website dedicated to European affairs, EU strategic and defence issues and the work of the European diplomatic service. **Nicolas Gros-Verheyde** is also the author of the handbook *Europe's common security and defence policy. Because Europe is worth defending.* (ehp)

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## Hélène Theunissen: "Artists who cannot create feel empty"

**Artists are part of the collateral damage caused by the pandemic. Theatres are closed, though some have temporarily opened here and there. A great many actors, directors, musicians, dancers and performers in the entertainment sector find themselves without work in these unexpected circumstances. The main consequences are fear for the future and an enormous sense of frustration.**

**Artists who cannot create feel empty and useless.**

Contrary to what some people think – that this period can be put to good use by reading, writing, revisiting current projects or working on new ones – the truth of the matter is that inspiration does not work to order. In a climate of insecurity and anxiety, artists are less likely to find inspiration. It is far from straightforward to make the most of this "compulsory" period that has been forced upon us: time has been suspended, through no choice of our own. Artists feel utterly defeated by the situation. And the longer it drags on, the more defeated they feel. This is the third time in a year that theatres have closed their doors and performances have been cancelled.

And then there are the financial consequences. Of course, furlough is a help, but these administrative measures are very time-consuming and complicated to get up and running. The money takes ages to arrive in people's bank accounts, and furlough only covers part of their wages. Many artists therefore find themselves in a precarious financial situation.

When it comes to rescheduling, theatre directors are overwhelmed and have to make difficult choices, postponing shows that have fallen victim to the health crisis to future seasons. New projects will be the last to be taken into consideration. There is a real bottleneck in theatres, the opera, the cinema and the world of events. The outlook is uncertain, something that generates anxiety.

Finding a way of being organised in the midst of this uncertainty is all but impossible.

To hear the media categorise us as "non-essential" to society is not only extremely insulting, but also raises profound questions for everyone working in the sphere of culture. I have dedicated my entire life to my profession: to hear that the state considers all this work as "non-essential" is painful and demoralising. Artists are therefore in a terrible predicament both financially and in terms of morale.

### **Becoming essential again**

There is a bright side as well. There is lots of solidarity among artists. The new technologies have proven useful for some artists, enabling them to find new ways of expressing themselves. Artists have had to invent a new way of existing. Nothing will ever replace the actual presence of an artist on the stage, however. The thing that is so magnificent about a live performance is the unique and exceptional communion with the public in flesh and blood. The combined physical presence of the artist and the public is fundamental to creating that moment of artistic inspiration.

People are starting to miss culture, and that is also something positive. When the cultural venues open again, I think the public will be galvanised in a different way, as people will have realised just how vital culture is – and just how essential artists are for freedom and for our collective development. Hopefully, people will want to enjoy culture even more than before.

In our field, the crisis is complicated no matter what your age. The situation for young people is the most dramatic of all. At the moment, I am working at the Conservatoire with my students – trainee actors – without even seeing their faces. They are in the throes of immense despair and frustration. For the ones who have just graduated, there are no openings to offer them at the present time. They no longer have access to professional networks. They will need a great deal of support in the aftermath of this crisis.

But artists of all generations have been hard-hit by the shut-down. The more experience we have, the greater the desire to return to the stage. Those of us who are older are afraid that they will never be sought again. This period of dearth is ringing the death knell for their careers.

We are putting up as much of a fight as our personal energy levels allow. Some of us have simply collapsed and run out of inspiration. Others have twice as much energy and are doing their utmost to do something, anything. They are active on social networks and have turned to the new technologies, for example. And then there are those who, like me, are brimming with energy one day and completely depleted the next.

**Hélène Theunissen**

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## [Nicolas Gros-Verheyde: the danger of Europe becoming undemocratic due to COVID-19](#)

**The measures taken by several European countries in the name of Health could result in a collateral victim: the rule of law.**

The appearance of COVID-19 in February-March 2020 may have caught us all by surprise and required improvised and urgent measures, but this is no longer the case today. Drastic measures to contain this health crisis may be justified. But they must be better anticipated and, above all, more closely monitored in a democratic way. This has not been the case to date.

Most of the time, measures are taken, on the fly, by the executive, in the wake of defence councils or other consultative committees, whose membership remains a mystery, without any real consultation (in the sense of providing prior information and an opportunity for consideration) of the various partners (social, economic or political) and without any decision by their national parliaments.

Certain fundamental principles – stemming from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) or the Charter of Fundamental Rights – are thus clearly being "set aside", for an unspecified period of time. The freedom of assembly and association (Article 11 ECHR) is violated and drastically limited. The right to express an opinion – via modes of expression such as the cinema or theatre – is prohibited. Particularly noteworthy is the limit on freedom of movement: a curfew at 6 p.m. (in France), permits required to leave

the country (in Belgium), etc. Freedom to practise one's religion (Article 9 ECHR), the right to education, and the right to engage in professional activities (Articles 14 and 15 of the charter) are severely curtailed, not to mention the right to respect for privacy and family life (Article 8 ECHR).

These decisions, once taken, are immediately applied, unquestioningly, and often in an arbitrary way. What is a "compelling reason" for crossing a border and what is not? Or an "essential reason" and what is not? It is up to the police authorities, or even mere airline clerks, to check. This is a very sensitive matter.

The European authorities are hardly consulted. For example, Paris did not notify the European Commission of the re-establishment of certain border controls, as stipulated in the Schengen Code. Similarly, the Belgian measures, which are outrageously discriminatory where European employers are concerned, have raised nothing more than an inaudible murmur from the European executive.

As for national parliaments, just like the European Parliament, they seem terrified into submission by the crisis. Everyone is worried that, by demanding compliance with the rules, they will look like a trouble-maker in what has become a national wartime cause, the fight against the epidemic. Yet, in spite of everything, we are not at war. At no time, moreover, have governments made use, in their existing constitutional arsenal, of this provision, which is actually quite well regulated.

Even the clause to opt out of the European Convention on Human Rights, the famous Article 15, has not been invoked, except by a few countries. Europe's old democracies have not dared to do so for symbolic reasons. In the words of Frédéric Sudre, professor emeritus at the University of Montpellier and one of the most renowned specialists on the ECHR, this is a real "quarantining".

The infringements of democracy and the rule of law are certainly being tolerated by the population, for the moment. But they are no less damaging for being invisible. They could lead to outpourings of anger, as unpredictable as they are explosive. They could cause a shift at the next elections towards the most extreme forms of populism. Above all, they could give strong arguments to the opponents of European unity, both on the continent and beyond. Russia's behaviour towards the head of the European diplomatic corps, Josep Borrell, on February 5 in Moscow, was no random occurrence. We need to wake up.

**Nicolas Gros-Verheyde**

**Editor-in-Chief, bruxelles2.eu**

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# EESC NEWS



## The time has come to deliver and give the word "community" new meaning

**On 27 January, Portugal's Prime Minister António Costa presented the priorities of his country's presidency of the EU at the EESC plenary. Portugal has pushed the social agenda to the top of its presidency's programme and asked the EESC to provide its expertise on seven key topics for the EU's future.**

Under the motto "**Time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery**", the presidency will focus on three major priorities: promoting a recovery leveraged by the climate and digital transitions; implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights; and strengthening Europe's autonomy whilst remaining open to the world.

"These priorities resonate perfectly with the priorities of our Committee: we are advocating an EU that prospers economically and is socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable," said EESC President **Christa Schweng**.

"The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic has proved the added value that our European Union represents. The start of the vaccination process on the one hand and the approval of the MFF and the Next Generation EU programme on the other have opened the door to hope and given new meaning to the word 'community'," **Mr Costa** emphasised.

The central event of the Portuguese Presidency will be the **Social Summit**, scheduled to take place in Porto on 7 May.

"Its main objective is to give a strong political impetus to the Action Plan that the Commission will present in March and to implement the EU Pillar of Social Rights, the best vaccine against social inequality, populism and fear," he stressed.

The Prime Minister also said that to achieve this fundamental objective, the Portuguese Presidency was counting on the key contribution and active participation of the EESC. The presidency has asked the EESC to provide its expertise on [seven key topics](#) for the EU's future. (mr)

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## EESC stands by European Commission in fight for Europe's recovery from COVID-19

**The EESC presidency, with its focus on building an economically, socially and environmentally stronger EU, backs the Commission's efforts to get Europe back on its feet after the COVID-19 crisis.**

This is the message that EESC President Christa Schweng delivered to European Commission Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight Maroš Šefčovič, who was attending the Committee's January plenary session.

**Ms Schweng** offered the Commission the EESC's full support, reiterating the commitment made in July 2020 with the adoption of the [EESC's contribution to the European Commission's 2021 work programme](#): "The Committee wishes to make a powerful contribution to Europe's recovery and future resilience to ensure a Europe that is economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable", said Ms Schweng. "Our incumbent challenge ahead is to effectively tackle the economic and social hardship caused by COVID-19."

For his part, **Mr Šefčovič** said that the Commission's 2021 work programme was designed to help the EU move beyond the fragility caused by the crisis and generate new momentum through future-proof solutions: "Our Union has showed a great deal of solidarity and unity. We do not just bounce back, but also forward and, after all the challenges of 2020, now is the time to kick our recovery from the COVID-19 crisis into gear and set out the future we want for our Union."

Commenting on the ongoing measures against the pandemic, he stressed that the Commission's efforts and work towards an EU Health Union had enabled the EU to take a coordinated approach on vaccination and secure the broadest portfolio of vaccines in the world, amounting to 2.3 billion doses. (mp)

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## Zero tolerance for harassment with the EESC's new Code of Conduct

**More clarity, greater financial transparency, strict rules on harassment and stronger sanctions for non-compliance. On 28 January 2021, the members of the EESC voted for major changes to their Code of Conduct. This is the first milestone in the reform of the Committee that the new EESC leadership is undertaking.**

The new rules contain a number of improvements to effectively prevent harassment and efficiently handle cases of misbehaviour. While prevention is the number one priority, it will now be possible to impose a range of sanctions on a Committee member in the event of confirmed wrongdoing.

The EESC President, **Christa Schweng**, promised to strengthen the Code of Conduct last October, at the beginning of her Presidency. "We delivered on this promise. The great work of the Rules of Procedure panel has ensured broad support for this proposal. This proves our commitment to high ethical standards and to modern, transparent working methods", said **Ms Schweng**.

Where there is an allegation of misconduct, the matter will be investigated by the new Ethical Committee, which will have clearly-defined investigative powers. Both EESC members and staff will be able to submit complaints to the Ethical Committee. Should an investigation take place, any recognised whistle-blowers will be protected and the Committee will cooperate closely with OLAF.

Depending on the outcome of an investigation and the seriousness of the misconduct, members may face a number of sanctions, including:

- removal from one or more of the offices they hold in the Committee
- repair of any damage caused
- temporary loss of allowances that members receive
- suspension from participation in some or all of the EESC's activities or missions
- prohibition from representing the EESC in any national, interinstitutional or international forums
- loss of the right to access confidential or classified information

In the most severe cases, it will also be possible to expel a member from the EESC.

The updated rules also further increase financial transparency, especially in relation to the reimbursement of members' missions and activities. Every year, members will be obliged to submit a financial declaration that will be made available on the EESC website. The document also clarifies cases of potential conflict of interest.

The changes follow the European Parliament's requests and recommendations as well as the recommendations from the European Ombudsman and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). (mwj)

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## EU to closely monitor implementation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement

**For the first time since the signing of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, Michel Barnier, Head of the European Commission Task Force for Relations with the UK, expressed his views on the text publicly during a debate at the European Economic and Social Committee's January plenary session.**

**Mr Barnier** stressed that there was nothing positive about Brexit: "This is a divorce, and nobody should be happy after a divorce. But this agreement we have reached with the UK proves that the EU is not a prison, as some demagogues on the right and left want us to believe; we can get out of it, but those who want to get out have to face the consequences in the form of distortions and turbulence".

The purpose of the agreement was to put in order the economic and trade-related aspects of the relationship between the EU and the UK after Brexit, knowing that it was not an end point: "It will not only be necessary to ensure the proper implementation of this agreement, but it will certainly have to be supplemented in the future for certain topics that the United Kingdom did not want to include this time, such as defence or foreign policy".

Mr Barnier also stressed that the work of the European Commission was not finished: the Commission would monitor implementation of the agreement and keep a close eye on any proposal from the British side that could result in regulatory divergence.

EESC president **Christa Schweng** thanked Mr Barnier for his work during the Brexit negotiations and for his "exemplary transparency and the time put in to keep civil society informed throughout the negotiation process", Mr Barnier having spoken on five occasions at EESC plenary debates.

**Jack O'Connor**, chair of the EESC's Brexit Follow-up Group, praised the way in which Mr Barnier had dealt with the situation in Ireland during the Brexit negotiations and called to mind the commitment made by the EESC and the Brexit Follow-up Group to "play our role to optimise the potential of this agreement", particularly in relation to UK civil society. (dgf)

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## Poverty in the EU could be halved by 2030, the EESC hears

**The number of people living in poverty could be cut by 50% over the next decade, said UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights at the EESC's January plenary session, revealing the findings of his mission to the EU institutions.**

Poverty reduction must be one of the main priorities of the European Commission's upcoming action plan for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), said Oliver De Schutter, UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

Mr De Schutter pointed out that poverty in the EU increasingly affected women and single-parent households.

He also cautioned that the Commission's Green Deal, while including a strong social dimension, was not a substitute for a poverty reduction strategy: "Reduction of poverty is not an objective per se in the Green Deal," he underlined.

He explained that **three structural constraints in combating poverty in the EU** had been identified:

- **Fiscal dumping** across EU countries, where the tax burden had gradually shifted from corporations and the wealthiest individuals to workers, consumers and low-income families over the past 20 years.
- **Social conditions and costs of labour**, with policies that attempted to improve cost competitiveness by reducing wages and social contributions paid by employers.
- The **macro-economic framework** within economic and monetary union, particularly the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which needed to be revised asap, exempting social investment in health and education from fiscal discipline measures.

Mr De Schutter said three ambitious objectives should be included in the Commission's action plan for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights:

- A strategy to reduce poverty by 2030, setting the ambitious goal of a 50% reduction in the number of people at risk of poverty.
- A child guarantee covering five essential areas: access to education, early childhood care, nutrition, housing and healthcare. This would involve supporting families by providing a decent income, work and access to benefits.
- A new legally binding instrument on minimum income schemes, ensuring that such schemes across the EU are adequate and that Member States follow a common methodology.

EESC president **Christa Schweng** said that, even before COVID-19, one in five people were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU and that this was a failure of our developed European societies. "One of the best ways to lift people out of poverty and prevent it is to build societal and individual resilience," said Ms Schweng.

She then pointed out that, besides funding, there was also a need to take a rights-based approach which recognised people affected by poverty as not only rights holders but also as agents for change. The commitment to leave no one behind entailed empowering or re-empowering people to play a positive role in society, she said. (at/mp)



## New Migration Pact: "The devil is in the detail"

**On 27 January, the EESC held a debate with Commissioner Johansson at its plenary session just before [adopting its opinion on A New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). In the opinion, the Committee voiced reservations as to whether the Pact would help develop a common European framework for migration management that would be both effective and in line with the EU's values.**

The rapporteur for the opinion, **José Antonio Moreno Diaz**, said "We had great hopes for this pact but I have to say we are a bit disappointed. The Commission's analysis is good, and we agree with the conclusions, but we are frustrated with the devil in the detail, where the proposals are concerned."

The co-rapporteur, **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, regretted the lack of progress on some of the issues dealt with in the pact. "We are sad to say that there has not been a lot of headway made, but a lot of backtracking. We would encourage the Commission to take a bolder approach to some of these issues."

The EESC's main objection was that the pact focused primarily on returns and the management of borders, at the expense of dealing with other burning issues, such as regular immigration channels, safe pathways for asylum and the integration of migrants. Also, some of the proposed solutions may not be feasible in practice.

The European Commissioner, **Ylva Johansson**, said she "did not agree at all" with criticism that the Commission was lacking in ambition. "The reality today is very different from 2015, when we had a massive inflow of refugees and relocation was a big issue", she said, explaining that the vast majority of irregular newcomers today were not refugees. Therefore, swift decisions and returns were very important, but so was the need to guarantee a fair process for all asylum seekers

"Those who are eligible to stay are welcome and we would like them to be part of our society," Ms Johansson said.

During the debate, the EESC expressed its utmost concern at the plight of migrants at the EU border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. (na)



## [Access to environmental justice is critical to implementing the EU Green Deal](#)

**A recent EESC report welcomes the [Commission's proposal to revise the EU Aarhus Regulation](#) and improve access to administrative and judicial review in environmental matters for individuals and NGOs, but stresses that the revamped regulation does not go far enough.**

Despite being a party to the Aarhus Convention since 2005, the European Union is still not fully complying with its "access to justice" provisions.

The amended regulation proposed by the Commission is a step forward and an essential tool for implementing the European Green Deal, says the EESC, which generally welcomed the proposed amendments in a report adopted in January.

However, rapporteur **Arnaud Schwartz** has flagged up loopholes in the new regulation that may be used by EU institutions to avoid being held accountable.

For example, the EESC does not endorse the Commission's proposal to exclude EU acts which involve "national implementing measures", because there is a real possibility that this exclusion could invalidate or water down the Commission regulation.

In addition, the EESC is concerned about the reform of the "internal review mechanism", which in the original Aarhus Regulation allowed environmental NGOs to challenge EU administrative acts and omissions. Allowing civil society organisations to conduct a review only when the implementing measures have been adopted would prevent many, if not most, EU acts and omissions being open to internal review.

The EESC also calls on the Commission to facilitate access to justice for all civil society organisations.

*"The social partners are key players in environmental issues, and they should be explicitly recognised as regards access to justice," stressed **Isabel Caño Aguilar**, EESC co-rapporteur. "To make judicial review accessible in practice, civil society organisations should not face extra burdens, such as additional costs and bureaucratic measures," Ms Caño concluded. (mr)*

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## EU climate goals: only a holistic approach can turn challenges into opportunities

The EESC reaffirms that reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 is the right choice. However, in its opinion [Stepping up Europe's Climate Ambition](#), the EESC stresses the need to step up efforts on intermediate targets to speed up the process, or risk missing the goal of climate neutrality by 2050.

It is true that COVID-19 has brought with it tremendous economic problems. However, the redirection of investment towards the recovery plan has opened the door to a new strategy: "recovery spending combined with ambitious climate action", stressed EESC co-rapporteur **Jan Dirx**.

"This opinion also highlights the need to strengthen the bio-economy and to substitute fossil fuels, and, consequently, it is critical to give priority to updating European legislation on the transition to renewable fuels", emphasised EESC rapporteur **Arnold Puech d'Alissac**.

It is more essential than ever to make use of every possible tool to upscale the climate ambition: the Green Deal, the Climate Law, the MFF, the Next Generation EU recovery fund, the CAP, the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, trade policies and agreements, etc. They all should be linked in a consistent manner, making sure the transition leaves no one behind.

Citizens are "crucial partners in the fight against climate change", and a pre-requisite for climate policy to be successful within the EU.

That is why the EESC has reiterated its proposal to create a [European Climate Pact Stakeholder Platform](#), based on the principles of inclusiveness, transparency, and genuine participation and ownership by climate stakeholders at all levels. (mr)

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## [EESC's Industrial Change Commission begins new term and adopts 2021 work programme](#)

**On 13 January, the European Economic and Social Committee's [Consultative Commission on Industrial Change](#) (CCMI) held the inaugural meeting of its new term of office and adopted its 2021 work programme.**

The CCMI president, **Pietro Francesco De Lotto**, vice-president **Monika Sitárová**, members and external delegates, whose term of office runs from November 2020 to November 2025, unanimously adopted the CCMI's Political Guidelines and Work Programme for 2021.

The work programme is based on three main pillars:

- a green transition for European industry;
- a comprehensive effort to digitalise Europe's production sectors;
- enhancing the global competitiveness of European industry, in line with the European Commissions' industrial policy review for 2021.

In his introductory remarks, **Mr De Lotto** highlighted the CCMI's unique role within the EESC as a pool of specialised industrial expertise. He reflected on the ongoing crisis and commented:

*"European industry doesn't just have to survive this crisis; it also has to create the conditions for better global competitiveness based on energy and the digital transition. The relevant European bodies, institutions and organisations need to support it in this task"* said Mr De Lotto.

The CCMI is the heir to the Consultative Committee of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the starting point of the European Union as we know it today. When the ECSC Treaty expired in 2002, it was agreed that the CCMI would take up its legacy and perpetuate its work on industrial activities and relations.

(ks)

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## Time for a more prosperity-oriented form of economic governance

**The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the Commission's recommendations on the economic policy of the euro area. It strongly supports the NextGenerationEU package and calls for the necessary agreements to be concluded as soon as possible.**

However, recovery from the COVID-19 crisis will only be successful if accompanied by a restructuring of our economy and society, and rebuilding confidence is key to stabilising demand. This can be achieved by:

Shifting towards a more prosperity-focused and solidarity-based form of economic governance. The EESC calls for the economic governance **review process** launched by the Commission to be resumed as soon as possible.

- Increasing private and public investment, with a '**golden rule**' for public investment, to safeguard productivity and the social and environmental base for future generations: "This means removing net investment from the calculation of deficit indicators", explains the rapporteur, **Judith Vorbach**.
  - Implementing the **European Pillar of Social Rights**: initiatives for a more social Europe include a proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages.
  - **Reforming tax policies**, shifting the tax burden away from labour to tax bases that are less detrimental to labour supply, while also taking into account the related impact on distribution. The EESC calls for substantial progress on introducing new own resources, as outlined in the recovery plan. (na)
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## [The EU needs a real strategy for energy system integration](#)

**The EESC has backed the European Commission's call for energy system integration. In the future, electricity, heating and transport should all be interconnected, with the ultimate goal of improving efficiency and achieving a climate-neutral economy**

In an [opinion](#) drawn up by **Lutz Ribbe** and adopted at the January plenary session, the EESC points out that such a strategy could contribute to securing energy supply, reducing energy imports and making affordable prices a reality for European consumers.

In the Committee's view, however, the European Commission fails to mention how the EU can achieve security of supply using low-carbon or carbon-free energy sources.

"The energy transition in Europe can only be successful if all issues are dealt with," said **Mr Ribbe**, speaking on the sidelines of the plenary session.

"The Commission states that 84% of electricity demand will have to stem from renewable sources, but fails to detail the sources from which the remaining electricity is to be produced. This is clearly unacceptable. Security of supply is crucially important for the European economy and consumers, especially as electrification of the heating supply and the transport sector is expected to boost electricity demand, despite progress on efficiency."

The EESC agrees with the Commission that the lack or inadequacy of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions pricing in the heating and transport sectors is a serious problem for the system's integration.

On top of this, renewable sources are not always favoured over fossil fuels. In many Member States, heavy taxation of electricity and excessive network charges create market distortions. In these cases, the use of surplus electricity to produce heat – the simplest form of system integration – is not economically viable.

The Committee therefore urges the Commission to put forward concrete proposals for solutions, instead of just describing the problem and being somewhat hesitant and vague. (mp)

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## Hydrogen can be a key driver of a new, post-COVID-19 model of society

**The European Union must overcome the COVID-19 crisis by building a new model of society based on greener, fairer and more resilient economies. As a clean energy, hydrogen can be a key driver of the transformation. This is the main idea behind an opinion by Pierre Jean Coulon adopted at the EESC's January plenary session.**

In the document, the EESC backs the EU Hydrogen Strategy put forward by the European Commission as a step forward in creating a favourable environment to increase supply and demand of hydrogen and to achieve a carbon-neutral economy.

"Clean hydrogen must become a clear priority, as this is the only option compatible with climate neutrality," said **Mr Coulon** during the plenary debate. "The European recovery funds must make it possible for businesses, innovators, workers and investors to affirm their role as world leaders in the expanding clean energy markets."

In particular, the EESC supports the creation of a European Clean Hydrogen Alliance to be tasked with planning production investments and organising demand for clean hydrogen in the EU.

This body will include industry leaders, civil society, national and regional ministers and the European Investment Bank. Since it will play a key role in speeding up the transformation of European industries, it is essential that the EESC be involved in its capacity as the representative of organised civil society. (mp)

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## NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



## Brexit deal: Business will need an adjustment period

**Statement by the EESC Employers' Group President, Stefano Mallia**

**EU employers welcome the Brexit deal and warmly congratulate the European Commission negotiating team, masterfully led by Michel Barnier. As businesses try to make sense of the 1 200-page trade treaty, however, they call for a period of adjustment to help them on their steep learning curve.**

European employers welcome the fact that an orderly Brexit has been achieved and that the integrity of the single market has been maintained. However, even if no tariffs are levied or restrictive quotas imposed on goods traded, a whole series of new customs and regulatory checks, including rules of origin and stringent local content requirements, will create red tape, possibly slowing down processes, and supply chains will take a while to adjust to the new reality.

This is why **companies need an adjustment period** to comply with the changes. To support all businesses, especially SMEs, through the implementation of the deal, a heavy-duty system, such as a **SOLVIT for BREXIT**, needs to be set up.

At the same time, there is a clear need to go back to the negotiating table in order to include the services sector in the deal, ensure the smooth flow of data between the EU and the UK and guarantee the mutual recognition of qualifications.

If we want Europe and the UK to remain closely linked, we need to continue working on our relationship. The UK can never be just another third country. The agreement must be a solid platform for future cooperation in a number of areas that have a major impact on our competitive environment, ranging from climate change to digital transformation, research and innovation and standards. But this deal is just the end of the beginning.

Civil society and employers in particular must fight to keep the channels of trade open and to build a sound structure that allows this to happen. (dv/kr)

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## There will be no recovery without a social recovery

By the EESC Workers' Group

**A webinar held by the EESC Workers' Group in January stressed the need for a new social contract to emerge from the forthcoming Porto Social Summit.**

We are living through the worst health and economic crisis in the European Union's history. However, while the pandemic has increased poverty, unemployment and inequality, these issues are far from new.

To discuss them, the EESC [Workers' Group held a webinar](#) in late January with **Nicolas Schmit**, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights,

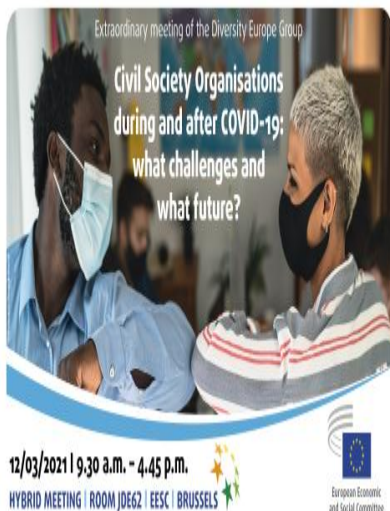
**Ana Mendes Godinho**, Portugal's minister for Employment, Solidarity and Social Security (replaced for health reasons by Secretary of State for Labour and Vocational Training **Miguel Cabrita**), **Iratxe García Pérez**, President of the S&D Group in the European Parliament, and **Oliver Röpke**, President of the EESC Workers' Group.

The speakers pointed out that the tools to assist where needed did exist and that it was necessary to make this happen. What was required, more than targets, was effective policies to make the European Pillar of Social Rights a tangible reality for citizens. The Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights must have short, medium- and long-term measures and legislative initiatives, as well as a sufficient budget.

It was argued that the Porto summit must be a real change of course, in the knowledge that there would be no recovery without social recovery and no sustainability without social sustainability. The way to make this work was to involve civil society and social partners in the process, provide a real platform for the voice and participation of workers and enhance collective bargaining and collective agreements.

The Porto Agenda 2030 that comes out of the summit must, beyond COVID, cover and tackle structural issues related to globalisation, wealth redistribution, labour market protection, social investment, the social agenda in the Green New Deal and the European Semester and the end of austerity policies, among many other concerns. It should be the beginning of a new social contract, avoiding the temptation to go back to business as usual and signalling the kind of future we wanted to build. We must ensure, the speakers stressed, that the existing rules were applied and the necessary ones were in place, in the process bringing people and Member States together, with solidarity, equality and sustainability, to make a strong social investment in our future. (prp)





## Diversity Europe Group conference to address the impact of COVID-19 on organised civil society

By the EESC's Diversity Europe Group

**On 12 March, the Diversity Europe Group will host a hybrid conference on *Civil Society Organisations during and after COVID-19: what challenges and what future*. The event will see the launch of the EESC study *The response of civil society organisations to the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe*, as well as topical debates with high-level speakers and civil society representatives.**

The study, commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Diversity Europe Group, highlights the activities of civil society organisations (CSOs) in assisting local communities and vulnerable groups to deal with the pandemic. Quantitative and qualitative data on their activities are presented through case studies.

The authors applied a mixed method combining desk-based research and an in-depth online survey. The study highlights key topics for the future of CSOs, such as the lack of stable funding streams, legal frameworks and adequate resources and skillsets, which will require future reflection and bold political decisions to make sure that CSOs' capacities are maintained and strengthened in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. During the conference, the authors of the study will present their main findings and recommendations.

Subsequent discussions with high-level speakers and civil society representatives will focus on the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups of people, how civil society organisations have helped these vulnerable groups, initiatives taken by CSOs to review how they handled the crisis and the ways in which they will contribute to reconstruction and to sustainable post-COVID-19 communities.

More information on the event is available at: <https://europa.eu/!PG36rF> (jk)

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## SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



## Civil Society Days 2021: A Sustainable Recovery for the Future of Europe's Citizens

**What should a sustainable recovery from COVID-19 look like for Europe? What are the key strengths the EU should draw on to ensure a bright future for its citizens? These will be the questions at the heart of the EESC's Civil Society Days 2021, taking place online from 1 to 5 March.**

Throughout the pandemic, organised civil society has played a key role in coping with the countless challenges posed by COVID-19, including supporting public authorities which were struggling under the overwhelming difficulties.

This hands-on experience means it can bring precious insights to the debate about the recovery and offer some timely input into the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, as the end of the stalemate regarding its leadership paves the way for it to kick off in May.

The EESC's Civil Society Days 2021 will offer a series of stimulating debates with inspirational speakers and centred on the following key topics:

- multilevel sustainable democracy in Europe
- the social economy and youth entrepreneurship for a sustainable recovery
- the role of education and culture in the sustainable recovery for Europe
- the future of work in the wellbeing economy
- youth activism, systemic change and recovery in Europe
- a social Green Deal for a sustainable recovery
- the role of key civil society groups in the renovation wave
- the role and economic value of volunteers on the road to recovery and beyond.

Individuals and organisations wishing to participate in the conference can find out more and register [here](#).  
(dm)

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## [EESC to hold a social media debate on the role of systemic change in climate action](#)

**On 20 March, the EESC will hold a social media event bringing together young experts, activists and lobbyists from across Europe to discuss systemic change in climate action.**

On 18-19 March, the EESC's [Your Europe, Your Say \(YEYS\) 2021](#) will bring together more than 100 students from 33 countries for an online debate on climate change, modelled on the United Nations' COP (Conference of the Parties). The debate will be opened by European Commission executive, vice-president **Frans Timmermans**, and closed by European Parliament Green Party co-chair, **Ska Keller**.

In parallel, much like a COP, the EESC will hold a **public side event** for young people in the morning of Saturday 20 March 2021 entitled **Designing Systemic Change**, which will be broadcast live on social media.

Different panels will focus on explaining what systemic change means and how to implement it, and offer tangible, personal examples of sustainable activities that have the potential to drive it. This will provide our young audience with valuable new insights and, most importantly, the opportunity to express their views and ideas.

In addition to the discussions, the audience will have the opportunity to **discover systemic change through art**. An online cultural event linked to the online debates will allow the young audience to experience systemic change and its implications within a broader context. To follow the event, visit: [Your Europe, Your Say | Facebook](#) (cl)



## [Culture goes live in the first EESC Art Talk of the year](#)

**On Monday 25 January, the European Economic and Social Committee held its first online Art Talk for a virtual launch of the online exhibition "Hand in Hand" by [Maria Reis Rocha](#).**

A live discussion between the EESC Vice-President for Communication **Cillian Lohan**, the EESC member **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier** and the Portuguese artist of the art works on display engaged viewers in a "cultural journey", encouraging us all to reflect on social challenges via the amazingly crafted illustrations.

Did you miss it? Catch it here: [EESC Cultural webinar - Meeting Maria Reis Rocha](#)

[Rocha - YouTube](#)

The "Hand in Hand" virtual exhibition was set up under the auspices of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU and ran online until 15 February 2021.

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