



EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

April 2021 | EN

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Our time is now!

Dear readers,

This year's Europe Day on 9 May will also mark the launch of the long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe. This is a unique opportunity not only to engage in a broad debate on how the EU should evolve, but also to bring the ownership of the European project back to its citizens – at national, regional and local level. I would like to encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity.

The EESC, as the house of European organised civil society, has for a long time been pushing for reform of Europe through stronger involvement of its citizens. I am convinced that bridging "the Brussels bubble" with citizens can result in original yet down-to-earth ideas for the future.

To let this potential fully flourish, we need to avoid pre-empting the views of citizens. The discussions as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe must be open to thinking out of the box. None of the discussion panels should assume the outcome of the debate.

The future of Europe also requires a new, positive narrative. We need to prove that Europe is a great place that creates opportunities for everyone to live the life they want, based on commonly agreed values. People in the US are proud of their American dream. I believe it is time Europeans finally start enjoying and appreciating their own lifestyle and the benefits it brings.

The official launch of the conference will take place in Strasbourg, in hybrid form due to COVID-19 restrictions. We can already expect that – at least at the beginning – most of the activities relating to the conference will be in this format.

The pandemic means that the Conference on the Future of Europe now has a strong digital element. Paradoxically, this makes it more accessible to ordinary citizens – especially through the digital multilingual platform. I would like to encourage all of you to use this tool – either to participate in an existing event, to organise your own discussion or to share your ideas on European integration. The future of Europe is in our hands!

Christa Schweng

EESC President

DIARY DATES

7 May 2021, Porto

Social Summit

9 May 2021

Europe Day 2021 and official inauguration of the Conference on the Future of Europe

9-10 June 2021, Brussels

EESC plenary session

ONE QUESTION TO ...



One question to....

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

For the April edition we asked **Pietro Francesco De Lotto**, president of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI) to share his views on the industrial transformation and Green Deal rules with EESC info readers.



"Ensuring the green and digital transition increases resilience, competitiveness and social justice"

EESC info question: how and by when can the transformation to a greener, more circular and more digital industry be achieved, reaching the objectives of the European Commission's Green Deal? What role do raw materials play in this process?

Pietro Francesco De Lotto, CCMI president: whether we are talking about a fourth, fifth, or even sixth industrial revolution, we often see public debate emerge. Despite the different views on the issue, the sure thing is that we are undergoing a profound revolution in our industry which comprises a twin challenge: that of becoming greener and more circular as well as a digital transformation. It is a revolution that is driven by several factors: public opinion, consumer sensitivity, pursuit of global competitiveness and a need to adapt labour to new models, etc.

As in all revolutions, the final outcome will be radical change. In our case, this will hopefully mean a European industry that has turned greening and digitalisation into a competitive edge on the global scene. This is a process that has already been happening for several years, but there is a need for public authorities to properly govern this transformation to ensure that its benefits reach every company, every worker and every region of Europe.

The fight against climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals are clearly essential pillars of EU action, but we need to ensure that they are perceived more and more as an opportunity rather than as a burden by all parts of society and industry. The European Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the New Industrial Strategy for Europe (and its forthcoming update), and all related activities and legislation are essential tools to transform these debates into an everyday reality, everywhere in Europe, leaving no one behind in this collective effort.

Raw materials, and especially critical raw materials, are at the core of this process. Digitalising and greening EU industries and society requires technologies which, in turn, require raw materials. Just to give an example: wind power comes from turbines that contain, among other materials, rare earth elements. The EU relies almost 100% on China to supply such elements. And similar scenarios exist for many technologies which are essential to the green and digital transition, from batteries to photovoltaics, from robotics to fuel cells. The past months have brought these criticalities to the public's attention even more clearly, as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the need for EU industry and society overall to become more resilient and strategically autonomous, including in areas such as vaccines, medicines and medical devices.

The Commission's Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials, which was also the object of a recent CCMI/EESC opinion, is a good instrument that combines fixing current shortcomings with actions to prepare for possible future problems.

To answer your question more clearly: we want to see EU industry flourish in a green and digital way, but we do not want to see our industry and society shift from one dependency (for instance on certain fossil fuels) to another full reliance on certain critical raw materials. To avoid this, and to ensure that the green and digital transitions increase resilience, competitiveness and social justice, we need to invest in research and development, sustainable domestic mining exploration, recovering valuable materials from waste and creating a multilateral level playing field. This is essential to ensure that the green and digital revolutions are successful and benefit EU industry and society as a whole.

GUESS WHO IS OUR GUEST..



The surprise guest

Each month we have been introducing a surprise guest - a public figure that gives us their take on current affairs, bringing a breath of fresh air to broaden our horizons, inspires us and makes us look closely at the world around us. For this April edition, we are pleased to welcome **Aurélie Vauthrin-Ledent**,

actress, writer and director, who tells us about her quest to save culture, which is so essential to our lives.

Aurélie Vauthrin-Ledent, originally from France, lives and creates in Belgium. A graduate of the Sorbonne University (performing arts), the National Regional Conservatory of Dramatic Art, Rouen (now the CRR) and the Brussels Royal Conservatory for Drama, **Aurélie Vauthrin-Ledent** is an actress, director, stage designer, singer-songwriter, artistic director and festival programmer. In the theatre, she has played roles from both the classical and contemporary repertoire, and has been directed by Peggy Thomas, Alexis Van Stratum, Renaud de Putter, Jamal Youssfi, Audrey Marsin, Charlie Degotte and Thierry Robrechts.

In 2014, Aurélie wrote and directed "Cerise à l'eau-de-vie" at the Théâtre de la Vie in Brussels.

In 2016, at the Théâtre Le Public, she played the main role in "L'échange" by Paul Claudel, a play directed by Peggy Thomas. In the 2016/2017 season, she developed, coordinated and led the *Francophonique II* writing workshop at the Théâtre des Doms in Avignon, a workshop created by the director Alain Cofino Gomez.

In January 2020, at the Théâtre de la Vie, she directed the play "Les Corbeaux" by Henry Beque, in which she also acted.

Since 2016, Aurélie has been writing, composing and singing under the name of *La Chouette et les Oiseaux de nuit*.

In 2016, she set up the Tri-Marrant multidisciplinary festival at the Théâtre de la Vie in Brussels and remains its artistic director and programmer. The festival grew in 2018 and became a biennial event. The third Tri-Marrant festival, which was supposed to take place in June 2020, has been postponed until June 2022 due to COVID-19.

In April 2020, Aurélie founded a new publishing house for French-language theatre in Belgium, "Les Oiseaux de Nuit", of which she is the editorial, artistic and administrative director.



"Most importantly, yes, culture is essential!"

I was born 40 years ago, on 28 March 1981. Never in my lifetime has the word "essential" been so often linked to the word "culture" than during this health crisis and the ensuing economic downturn. Many of our ideals are clearly going to change. We are seeing and will continue to see a significant overhaul in all areas of our society.

The word "essential" came to light because those involved in culture were, in the beginning, considered as "non-essential". Classifying us as "non-essential" has led to the emergence of an unstoppable movement which seeks a deeper and more widespread awareness.

Against all odds, art and culture, which had initially been overshadowed and consigned to the sidelines, now oddly finds itself being brought to the fore, with a strange, even bitter aftertaste.

I am a woman of culture. It fuels me and I create it. I am an actress, singer, director, author, French and theatre teacher, French-language Belgian theatre editor and festival planner. I am developing a particular fondness for plastic arts, scenography and the art of movement and dance. And I am not afraid to roll up my sleeves and get to work, sometimes doing casual jobs. The jobs that are often not valued by our society. I am not afraid to work. That's what makes me who I am. It's the most important value my parents passed on to me. But culture is my third parent. Culture was the final building block in shaping me, the cement. It has contributed to many radical changes in me: developments and internal transformations and changes. Culture has opened my mind, and above all, my heart. I've taken some of the most beautiful journeys of my life during precious moments spent playing the cello, immersed in my emotions, or while watching Shakespeare's work captivating an attentive audience or while looking at endless unfathomable paintings on the wall, or in a museum. And what can we say about the wonderful world of theatre? It's not just about staging or a text - it's a diverse and complex universe, ranging from puppet theatre to improvisation and from the art of words to physical theatre. There are as many disciplines and sub-genres in theatre as there are in medicine.

Of course, we have been at a standstill for a year. Our profession's suffering is striking. It consists primarily of mental anguish, followed by economic suffering due to the ceasing of performing arts activities, which are experiencing a serious financial crisis. Too little is known about the entertainment professions, but they are wide-ranging. Authors, directors, actors, costume designers, playwrights, light and sound technicians, set builders, scenographers, make up artists, assistants and all pre- and post-production trades: broadcasting, communications, promotions, front of house staff, and bookings. And this list is not exhaustive.

It's also perhaps even more important to mention the suffering of the audience - the people. With people now limited to either Netflix or books, they opt too quickly for the colourful images, an easy and unique part of our culture. The only option on offer is isolation, instead of sharing and openness and moments of laughter and dreaming of far-away travels, sitting comfortably in our red velvet armchairs.

And then there is the suffering that comes from a lack of learning, because culture gives the best life lessons!

Most significantly, the word "essential" is now everywhere and is associated with the cultural professions because of this initial negative "non-essential" label given to us unfairly by our leaders. While I am far from rebelling today, I have this wild (as all hope is) and unwavering hope for the future. I hope that in the near future, ordinary people will understand, once and for all, that when we use the term "culture" it is followed first and foremost by the word "essential".

So, while trying to bury us, they have made us flourish. We are in the process of making culture grow like never before. I firmly believe the future will confirm this - I am convinced of it. At the end of this crisis, nothing about culture will ever be devalued again.

Aurélie Vauthrin-Ledent



[Le vieux poète parle doucement](#)

Nous avons le plaisir de vous présenter à nouveau une série de haïkus, sous le titre commun "**Le vieux poète parle doucement**", que nous a offerts leur auteur, **Herman van Rompuy**, ancien président du Conseil européen.

Herman van Rompuy: *Le vieux poète parle doucement*

Celui qui a vu le soleil

Ne s'habitue jamais vraiment au froid

Un fils du soleil

XXX

L'envie et le désir

des fleurs et des bourgeons

du sourire du printemps

XXX

Prunus blancs

Des arbres nus jaloux

Des couleurs colorent la vie



XXX

The longing and the desire
for flowers and buds
for the smile of spring

XXX

White prunus
Trees naked jealous
Colours colour life

[The old poet speaks gently](#)

We are pleased to present a new selection of haikus by **Herman Van Rompuy**, former President of the European Council, as part of our series "The old poet speaks gently".

The haikus were originally written in French.

Herman van Rompuy: The old poet speaks gently.

He who has seen the sun

Never really gets used to the cold

A son of the sun

EESC NEWS



["Member States are working hard, but there is still a lot to do before national plans are ready."](#)

In a debate at the EESC plenary session on 25 March, European Commission Executive Vice-President for an Economy that Works for People, Valdis Dombrovskis, said that most of the national recovery and resilience plans (RRPs) were still at an early stage

and that "there is still a lot to do before the plans are mature enough". He also noted that trade policy has a key role to play in getting the EU economy back on track.

EESC president **Christa Schweng** opened the debate by saying that the EU and its Member States had responded to the crisis promptly and energetically, and that the EESC was now counting on the speedy and efficient implementation of NextGenerationEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

She also referred to the EESC's call for an [economic governance framework](#) that facilitates economic recovery, is prosperity-oriented, and reflects the current post-crisis economic reality. The EESC was ready to discuss the economic governance review and had suggested launching a stakeholder conference to be co-hosted by the EESC and the Commission.

Regarding the national RRP, **Mr Dombrovskis** explained that the Commission had received information from 23 of the 27 countries on what they intend to include. "However, while speed is important to get the RRF funds flowing as soon as possible, what is important above all else is quality". He warned that there was still a lot to do before the plans were mature enough to be submitted and approved. He flagged up three main areas which still required work: audit and checking systems; credible cost estimates and tracking of climate and digital spending; and respect for the principle of 'do no significant harm'.

He added that implementation of the plans must be flanked by support from the social partners and civil society at every stage. He thanked the EESC for carrying out a timely and relevant stocktaking exercise with [its resolution on civil society involvement in the Recovery and Resilience Plans](#).

On international trade, **Ms Schweng** said that a rules-based multilateral trading system, as well as an open, fair, inclusive and predictable international trading environment, must continue to be a guiding principle for the European Union. The EESC was looking forward to contributing to the analysis, which would identify best practices in this field in an own-initiative opinion to be adopted by September.

Lastly, **Ms Schweng** said that the EESC hoped the EU would be able to inspire new cooperation and more consistency between the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other international organisations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), on matters of trade and investment, decent work, social and human rights, and climate change.

Mr Dombrovskis agreed that the right answer on how to support our recovery and ensure Europe's prosperity was to keep trading with our global partners. Regarding the institutional reform of the WTO, he said that the Commission's goal was to recast the WTO as a forum for tackling the most pressing problems of today's world, such as dealing with the impact of COVID-19, supporting environmental and social sustainability, updating the rules for digital trade, and addressing unfair trading practices. (na)



[#YEYS2021: Europe's young generation takes up the climate challenge](#)

High school students from all over Europe handed concrete proposals for climate action to the European Commission's

Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans - the outcome of a virtual Youth Climate Summit organised by the European Economic and Social Committee on 18-19 March 2021.

"Young Europeans have a say in the EU's future: without your calls for action, the [European Green deal](#) would not be here today", said **Mr Timmermans** welcoming the event [Your Europe your say 2021](#). "I am really impressed at your in-depth understanding of the climate change problem and at the way you presented your proposals to me. This is the way to live - understanding each other. It's extremely difficult to hate a person that you can understand," he concluded.

After two days of lively virtual debates, over 234 students aged 16-18 from 28 countries working in parallel in 45 virtual negotiation rooms developed practical recommendations, which they presented during a final plenary session.

The students had to wear the hat of a stakeholder group, simulating a [United Nations Climate Change Conference](#) (COP) and work together with other groups to create a plan to limit global warming to safe levels of well below 1.5°C by the end of the century. The groups represented real-life sectors and industries whose activities and advocacy influence global warming.

The proposals included:

- Planting city trees and installing vertical gardens
- An "Ecological Manhattan Project" for the EU, investing vast sums in new technologies
- Investing in more education for the general public
- Implementing tailor-made policies that respond to each country's specific circumstances
- Supporting afforestation as one of the most efficient long-term solutions for carbon removal
- Introducing hydrogen and biogas, while phasing out fossil fuels
- Closing the gap between developed and developing nations

The young Europeans' final plan translated into a temperature increase of 1.4°C by 2100, thus achieving the goal of the exercise, and was presented by eight students.

Cillian Lohan, Vice-President of the EESC in charge of communication, closed the event by saying: "I hope the experience of YEYS has given you the desire to be active citizens; we need your participation for democracy to be strong. The youth movement has shown that change can come from the streets. Today we help those demands for more action to resonate in the corridors of power".

Further details about YEYS 2021 are available on [the event's official page](#). (ks)



Change the system if you want to stop climate change, the EESC hears

On 20 March the EESC hosted a virtual side event in conjunction with Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS) on *Designing Systemic Change*, bringing several experts, activists and influencers together to share their knowledge and expertise on climate action through the lens of systemic change.

The event was chaired by the EESC's vice-president with responsibility for Communication, **Cillian Lohan**, who introduced the topic: "Climate change is intensifying and it is hard to see a way out as individuals; this challenge requires a fundamental change of culture, behaviour and values".

The event was divided into four panels, all focusing on the need for systemic change to address climate change.

Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, opened the first panel with a video message highlighting the need for an all-embracing approach: "Climate change, biodiversity loss, resources diminution and pollution are connected, and we need to tackle them together. The European Commission's response is the Green Deal, but citizens have a role to play, as we need fresh ideas that have to be systemic".

Josephine Becker, climate activist, mentioned the concept of climate justice: "Europe is in part responsible for this climate crisis, so we have a duty to act."

On the second panel, **Corina Angheloiu**, Senior Design Strategist at the Forum for the Future, gave her view on the right approach to launch systemic change: "The key entry point to start systemic change is values; current economic systems focus on efficiency, but if we put justice at the heart of the system, we could see the consequences".

Nisreen Elsaim, chair of the United Nations Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, had this message: "The current economic and political systems are not serving our purposes and are harming our environment. Results-based management is not working".

Lewis Akenji, Managing Director of the Hot or Cool Institute, explained in the third panel discussion how current systems influence people's lifestyles and choice of transport, work, food, etc.: "We are creating growing inequalities and consuming too much; current economic and political systems are not making us happy".

Saoi O'Connor, climate activist, talked about the role of decision-makers: "Leaders and politicians can talk about numbers and policies, but they don't seem to take people's reality into consideration".

The last panel showcased specific examples of systemic change initiatives. **Christian Kroll**, CEO and founder of the web search engine Ecosia, explained that all the company's profits are used to plant different species of trees with added value for local communities around the world.

The slow fashion campaigner and influencer **Juliet Bonhomme** stressed the power of consumers through the choices they make: "Our money is our power".

The event was followed on Facebook by more than 100 people from across Europe, who also had the opportunity to discover systemic change through art with **Sophie Ong** and **Tibor Miklos**, two artists who presented works inspired by the debates immediately after the event. (dgf)



The EESC's central role is fully recognised by the Conference on the Future of Europe

The European Economic and Social Committee has been called on to join the key body of the conference that is to chart the course of the EU's future development.

The President of the European Commission, **Ursula von der Leyen**, in her political guidelines of July 2019 for the then incoming Commission, called for a Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) to allow citizens to have their say in the EU's future development.

Building on that, a Joint Declaration on the CoFoE was signed on 10 March 2021 by the Presidents of the EU's three main institutions (the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of the EU), defining its precise scope (engaging with citizens), content (achieving the twin green and digital transition and strengthening Europe's resilience, competitiveness and solidarity) and timetable (conclusions should be produced by spring 2022).

The Executive Board is the pillar of the CoFoE's governance, since it oversees the work of the Conference and directly reports to the Conference Plenary.

The EESC, as the House of European civil society and the bridge between the European institutions and organised civil society, has been invited to join the Executive Board.

Christa Schweng, the EESC President, has taken part in all the Executive Board meetings.

Meanwhile, the EESC is fine-tuning its contribution to the CoFoE, it can count on at least three key strengths:

- its 329 members coming from all walks of life (employers, trade unions and civil society at large) and from the 27 Member States,
- its established network with the national economic and social councils and
- its Liaison Group, a network of civil society organisations, which, while not directly represented at the EESC, have strong ties with it, further increasing its outreach.

The EESC is convinced, more than ever, that through specific and concrete contributions to the CoFoE it can make a difference, ensuring that the voice of European civil society will be heard loud and clear. (sm)



EESC delves into the challenges of teleworking

The first COVID-19 lockdowns saw the number of remote workers in the EU workforce skyrocket from 5% to 40%. A year later, with teleworking here to stay, it is still difficult to deliver a proper assessment of its impact on employers, employees and society as a whole. The EESC points to the need for more research and for a

long-term perspective, with a view to harnessing the benefits and mitigating the risks of this form of work

Despite the obvious opportunities it offers workers and employers alike, such as greater productivity, more flexible working arrangements and greater autonomy, remote working can still have a negative impact on people's working and private lives. During the pandemic the boundaries between the two have at times become blurred, with excessive workloads, longer working hours and insufficient rest time.

In a culture which is "always on", in which many workers find it difficult to disconnect, this can subsequently take a toll on people's mental and physical health and wellbeing. More likely to be doing home-based jobs and juggling them with domestic chores, women are particularly exposed to the negative sides of working from home, the EESC said in two opinions on remote working adopted at its March plenary session.

The figures, provided by a Eurofound study, showed that 30% of "regular" remote workers now worked daily or several times a week in their free time and around 20% worked more than 48 hours a week. Around 40% of "regular" remote workers rested for less than 11 hours a day.

To minimise the risks and amplify the benefits of remote working in post-pandemic times, the EESC is therefore calling on the social partners in the Member States to draw up rules tailored to each country, and each sector-specific and company-specific situation, in the framework of the existing social dialogue and collective bargaining systems.

Remote working should be properly regulated; it is important here to ensure that it is reversible once the COVID crisis is over and that it remains voluntary. Remote workers should have the same individual and collective rights and the same workload as their colleagues working on their employers' premises. Remote working arrangements must be set out in writing, guaranteeing equal treatment and equal health and safety conditions at work, the EESC said.

"Working from home is going to be a feature of future labour markets, but we cannot allow it to lead to social regression and the isolation of workers. It can help people reconcile professional and personal lives but we cannot allow any discrimination or difference in treatment between those who work at home and those who decide to go to the office," said the rapporteur for the opinion on the *Challenges of teleworking*, **Carlos Manuel Trindade**.

Given how fast this way of working is spreading, and in the light of the lessons learnt from the pandemic, the existing EU agreements covering remote working should be assessed to make sure they are still effective in the new circumstances, the EESC noted.

Particularly relevant are the 2002 and 2020 Framework Agreements on Telework and Digitalisation respectively, signed by the social partners at EU level. They should be taken into account by the Member

States and social partners when drawing up national frameworks for companies and workers using this form of work.

Furthermore, a European initiative could potentially be launched under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and/or at Member State level to protect and give effect to the right to disconnect.

The EU and Member States should also make use of existing legislation, such as the Working Time and Work-Life Balance Directives, which is fully applicable to remote working. Those directives should be transposed into national law and implemented accordingly, as this will "undoubtedly lead to an improvement in the working conditions of teleworkers".

The EESC also drew attention to the risk of using remote working to impose a double burden of paid and unpaid work. Domestic work is still not equally divided between women and men, being mostly shouldered by women, and this reduces their ability to be productive in paid work and could also undermine their professional prospects.

"Both society as a whole and businesses must do everything possible to dispel these gender stereotypes and recognise women as full workers beyond their many other roles and qualities. The economic and social cost of these prejudices for society is very heavy," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Milena Angelova**.

In this regard, the EESC also called for a "Care Deal for Europe", stressing that available, accessible and affordable care infrastructure and services for children, people with special needs and older people are another crucial prerequisite for gender-equal remote working. (II)



[It is high time to scale up European action on disability policies](#)

On 24 March, the EESC hosted a debate with the EU Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, on the new Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities, recently launched by the European Commission.

The strategy, which is to be in place from 2021 to 2030, seeks to ensure full implementation in the EU of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD is a breakthrough treaty which has changed the perception of disability by embracing a human rights approach to it and giving society responsibility for removing the barriers preventing the people concerned being fully included in society.

"We welcome the new EU Disability Strategy. Some 87 million people in the EU have some form of disability, and more than half of them feel discriminated against," said EESC president, **Christa Schweng** in her opening remarks.

She reminded that the EESC was the first institution to adopt an own-initiative opinion in 2019 calling for a new Disability Rights Agenda fully aligned with the UNCRPD: "I am very pleased to see that many of the recommendations we put forward at the time are reflected in the EU Disability Strategy proposed a few weeks ago."

The EESC insisted on full implementation of the UNCRPD, both in its opinions and through the work of its thematic study group on disability rights, set up to monitor how the UNCRPD is put into effect in the Member States.

The opinion on [Shaping the EU agenda for disability rights 2020-2030](#) is not the EESC's only text on this issue: it has adopted several others as well, such as the [information report](#) and the [opinion](#) on the right of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections. The EESC will analyse the new strategy in a new opinion, to be presented at its plenary session in July.

"Ten years after the EU ratified the UNCRPD, it is now high time to scale up European action in the field of disability policies. Our goal is to bring positive changes to the lives of persons with disabilities in the EU and beyond so they can participate on an equal basis with others with no exception," said Commissioner Dalli.

EESC members spoke favourably of the new strategy, but warned that, when implementing it, the EU and Member States must take into account the devastating effects of the pandemic on persons with disabilities, especially in the field of employment and education, as existing inequality was getting worse. (II)



[EU rail transport - European Year of Rail 2021 is the right time for change](#)

Railway transport still needs to make political, regulatory and cultural progress, although 25 years of liberalisation have gone a long way towards opening up markets and achieving technical harmonisation. This is the main message of an opinion on a

Single European Railway area adopted at the EESC March plenary.

An unbiased analysis of the Single European Railway Area and its achievements is needed and the **European Year of Rail 2021** could provide an excellent opportunity to take stock of developments and set new objectives for the future, stresses the EESC.

Speaking at the plenary debate, the [opinion](#) rapporteur **Stefan Back** said: "Rail is in need of a change of culture and an approach that is much more centred on customers' needs, whether it be passenger or freight transport. The European Year of Rail 2021 should be used as an opportunity to promote this behavioural change and develop smoother cooperation between operators and customers and to make the most of digitalisation."

The COVID-19 pandemic has held up or stalled projects, which now must catch up. State aid remains crucial to ensure essential services beyond the crisis and public service contracts can guarantee accessible, affordable and inclusive passenger services for all. In the EESC's view, this is one of the most effective and efficient measures to promote railway passenger transport. (mp)



Energy transition – The EU needs speed change

The pace of transformation towards the Energy Union needs to step up significantly if we are to meet the 2050 EU energy and climate objectives, but overlooking the social and economic situation in individual Member States could be dangerous, argues the EESC in a recent opinion.

Lack of consideration for the social and economic conditions in the different Member States could jeopardise social acceptance of investment and reforms aimed at accelerating the energy transition, stresses the EESC.

In the [opinion](#), drafted by **Lutz Ribbe** and adopted at the March plenary session, the EESC sets out its position on the 2020 reports on the State of the Energy Union and the Assessment of National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), saying that, although the energy and climate objectives for 2020 have largely been met, this should not lead to complacency.

The objectives for the next 30 years, starting with the 2020s, must be much more ambitious and really put Europe's people at the core of the Energy Union.

Mr Ribbe said: "Energy transition is at risk if politicians promise participation for broad swathes of society, but in reality do not take that promise seriously and do not put it into practice." (mp)



The Commission's new strategy for tackling non-performing loans is not fit for COVID-19 times

The EESC welcomes the Commission's new Action Plan on non-performing loans, but believes that it lacks new proposals fit for the age of COVID-19, leaving Europe to face an extraordinary time with rules written for ordinary times.

[In an opinion adopted by the plenary assembly on 25 March](#), the EESC analysed the strategy for tackling non-performing loans (NPLs). The European Commission has set out its main concerns about specific sectors of the economy, such as banks, credit purchasers, credit servicers. However, the EESC has outlined the point of view of wider European society.

"The EESC cares a lot about the stability of the banking sector", said the opinion rapporteur, **Kęstutis Kupšys**. "But we also care about businesses that are indebted and cannot pay their debts anymore, as well as viable businesses that may need additional money from the banks. We also had vulnerable citizens in mind, those who are indebted and are about to become victims of 'vulture funds'. Finally, we had all taxpayers in mind: when, or rather if, public funds are allocated to buy portfolios of NPLs, they are the ones who pay to save banks from bad debts".

The EESC recommends tackling first and foremost the root causes of NPLs to prevent their build-up in the future. The best way is to ensure that competitiveness is constantly improved, focusing on business continuity and economic recovery, while building solid social security systems, combating poverty, over-indebtedness and unemployment, guaranteeing adequate wages and implementing countercyclical economic policy measures in times of crises.

Given the coronavirus' impact on EU economy, the volume of NPLs is expected to rise across the EU. In order to mitigate the negative consequences, the EESC calls for relief measures for credit institutions to go hand in hand with government aid measures for borrowers who have only become distressed as a result of the pandemic.

While the European Commission proposes further developing secondary markets for distressed assets, the EESC believes that the need for a pan-EU, cross-border NPL market is overstated. It is dangerous to provide an EU-wide operating "passport" to debt collectors without proper supervision from both their "home" and "host" countries. This move could only be justified if there is a counterbalancing set of measures helping protect distressed borrowers: an EU-wide consumer protection standard for debt collectors.

In addition, it is highly questionable whether the cross-border operations of credit purchasers provide tangible economic benefits for the economic system overall, and not just for banks, credit purchasers and credit servicers.

When it comes to selling NPLs to asset management companies (also colloquially referred to as "bad banks"), the EESC believes that this should remain the exception. Preference needs to be given to bilateral workout agreements between the credit institution and the borrower, focusing on business continuity and economic recovery.

According to Kęstutis Kupšys, the European Commission's document deals narrowly, in technocratic terms, with an issue that affects many sections of society "on the ground". "The message we want to convey is that the NPL issue should not be fused with issues related to preserving financial stability", he commented. "All in all, we see the proper way to deal with NPLs as being inside the banks, not just by dropping them on to the market when the loans become shaky. Debts should not become a commodity!" (na)



EESC proposes measures to support investment in the extraction and recycling of critical raw materials

At its March plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion which proposes to support investment in the exploration and extraction of critical raw materials and the use of secondary materials from waste, as this is essential to the green transition in the EU.

In September 2020, the European Commission adopted its Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials, with the aim of reducing dependency on primary critical raw materials and strengthening domestic sourcing of raw materials in the EU. The opinion adopted by the EESC welcomes this approach, as it "fully supports the green transition and considers the extraction of raw materials necessary for the deployment of green technologies a fundamental step".

However, in its opinion the EESC calls for additional measures to make this approach possible, as exploration and extraction are high-risk activities. The rapporteur, **Dumitru Fornea**, stressed this view: *"Incentivising both primary and secondary sourcing is essential, and so we need to assist investment in the extraction sector and accelerate the analysis of waste potentially containing valuable materials."*

The co-rapporteur, **Michal Pintér**, explained that this support may take a variety of forms: *"We need to assist investment through loan guarantees, depreciation regimes and state aid, but also by developing a streamlined authorisation process for mining activities,"* he said.

The opinion also stresses the importance of broadening the definition of critical raw materials, which are traditionally understood as materials coming from the mining sector. In the EESC's view, this is too narrow and limits the growth of green energies, as wood-based materials can be efficiently used in many more applications than in the past.

The raw materials sector has huge economic potential. It provides about 350 000 jobs within the EU and more than 30 million jobs in downstream manufacturing industries that depend on reliable and unhindered access to mineral raw materials. The OECD forecasts that global material use will double by 2060, and metal use in particular is expected to grow by 150%. This is very likely to increase pressure on the planet's resources and jeopardise gains in global wellbeing.

Taking this into account, the opinion emphasises the importance of integrating new dimensions into the methodology used for establishing a list of critical minerals. The EESC considers that the European Commission should take into consideration "the needs and interests of the people and the economies in the countries from which raw materials are to be exported to Europe". Appropriate criteria to check whether the global supply chains for these types of raw materials comply with ethical principles should therefore be defined . (ks)



[The EESC calls for more precise and harmonised conditions for a more sustainable life cycle for batteries in the EU](#)

At its March plenary session, the EESC adopted an [opinion](#) which proposes more precise and operational governance arrangements and instruments to implement the new battery regulation with the involvement of all stakeholders. In the EESC's view, this could contribute to developing a Union framework covering the entire battery life cycle in the EU.

On 10 December 2020, the European Commission presented a proposal for a [Regulation](#) on batteries and waste batteries. The proposal is in line with the [European Green Deal](#), which promotes decarbonisation of the EU economy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

The opinion adopted by the EESC supports the measures set out in the Regulation: with its new battery sustainability standards, the Commission will also globally promote the green transition and establish a blueprint for more initiatives to come under its sustainable product policy.

However, in its opinion the EESC calls for more precise and functional governance instruments and arrangements to implement the new regulation, with all stakeholders involved. In the words of rapporteur **Bruno Choix**: "The proposed regulation aims to develop a Union framework covering the entire battery life cycle, including harmonised and more ambitious rules for batteries, components, waste batteries and recycled materials. Through this regulation the Commission intends to promote innovation as well as the development and implementation of the technological expertise of the EU".

The co-rapporteur, **Frank Uhlig**, explained that this support may take a variety of forms: "As regards the implementation of due diligence to monitor the battery supply chain, we demand full transparency in the implementation of this monitoring system. The recycling, renovation and reuse of batteries help to secure the upstream value chain. Supporting research and development on ecodesign is essential".

The EESC recommends addressing challenges in this area by strengthening the role and resources of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA).

The EESC proposes that the "end of use" concept be introduced in addition to "end of life" in order to promote the reuse, renovation or second life and recycling of batteries.

Batteries placed on the EU market should become sustainable, high-performing and safe along their entire life cycle. This means batteries that are produced with the lowest possible environmental impact, using materials obtained in full compliance with human rights as well as with social and ecological standards. Batteries have to be long-lasting and safe, and at the end of their life they should be repurposed, remanufactured or recycled, feeding valuable materials back into the economy. (ks)



European Research Area: the EESC hails its overhaul as a real New Deal for Europe's R&I

With the new blueprint, the European Commission shows it is determined to stop Europe from losing out to the US and Asia in both basic and applied research, patents and high-tech products and services, says the EESC in a [report](#) adopted at the March

plenary.

The key strength of the [proposed new European Research Area](#) (ERA) is its focus on **rapidly translating R&I results into sustainable business and sustainable jobs**, stresses the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

"It's absolutely necessary that the new ERA not be just more of the same," says opinion rapporteur **Paul Rübig**. "This New Deal will boost the impact of R&I at a time when innovation will be make or break, not only for Europe's COVID-stricken economy, but also for the survival of the planet."

European research has been slower than the US and Asia at converting R&D results into innovative products and services. Europe lags behind Asia in patent performance (Asia submitted 65% of global patent applications in 2019, Europe only 11.3%) and especially in digital service businesses and "technology-push innovations", i.e. new products driven by research and development in new technology. More generally, Asia, especially China and Korea, has massively improved its RTI performance over the past 20 years. The new ERA should help Europe catch up through investment and increased mobility.

While backing the Commission's blueprint, the EESC points to **five key sectors** which have been left out of its list of strategic technologies, yet are vital for the Europe's prosperity:

- digital business models;
- goods and food manufacturing technologies;
- clinical research and the pharmaceutical and biotechnological sector;
- space technologies;
- clean water and sanitation.

One other key point the EESC makes in its opinion is the need to **balance excellence with speed** in transferring R&D results into innovative products and services. In business, speed is of the essence, while scientists strive for excellence and ask for more time and money for R&I. The Commission's RTI policy should square one with the other. (dm)



The future of Europe will depend on how we deal with rural areas

Rural areas should be made more attractive for young people and businesses. This would improve the quality of life of all Europeans, allowing them to choose where they want to live and work. This was one of the key conclusions from the debate

entitled *Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural and urban development*, held at the EESC on 8 March.

Europe's rural and urban areas are not developing evenly. It is critical to foster policies that curb this trend, ensure a fair and sustainable transition to a well-being economy in all areas and promote population rebalancing. In particular, rural areas, which play a critical role in economic and social cohesion, in regions' resilience, and in the contribution of countless services from various local ecosystems, including food production, should be made more attractive for young people and businesses.

Peter Schmidt, president of the EESC's Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT), said: "The post-COVID recovery offers the perfect opportunity to prepare strategies that ensure that no areas or their citizens are left behind in the just transition to a climate-neutral, sustainable and prosperous European Union."

"Now that the EU has approved a courageous recovery package, the gaps between the EU territories have to be taken into account when allocating the funds," argued EESC member **Stefano Palmieri**, president of the EESC's Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion.

Deša Srsen, from the office of Commission vice-president Dubravka Šuica, emphasised: "With the [Long Term Rural Vision](#) the Commission is preparing for adoption in June, our ambition is to create a new momentum for rural areas."

Josep Puxeu Rocamora, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on [An integrated approach for the EU's rural areas](#), stressed that the integration of rural and vulnerable areas was very complex, because it touched on every single existing EU policy. "To develop these areas, we propose a 'territorial contract' which should be participatory, adapted to the characteristics of the territories and preserve their historical, cultural and natural heritage." (mr)



It is high time the Union of Equality was made a reality

Accurate data collection and appropriate policies by the Member States are necessary to ensure the effective implementation of the EU anti-racism action plan and to unmask racism and ethnic discrimination, which have taken a turn for the worse during the

COVID-19 pandemic in Europe.

With a quarter of Europeans feeling discriminated against in at least one area of their lives and racial and ethnic discrimination peaking in employment, there is a sense of urgency about efforts to update and enforce legislation to combat racism across the EU, a virtual hearing held on 18 March by the EESC revealed.

The hearing "A Union of Equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025" brought together speakers from EU institutions and European human rights and anti-racism platforms. The figures presented painted a bleak picture of the situation on the ground.

The rapporteur for the EESC opinion on this topic, **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, underlined the timeliness of the EU anti-racism action plan, coming as it did amid a deepening of inequalities and discrimination as a result of the pandemic.

From the European Commission, **Thibault Balthazar** underscored the important role of Member States, encouraging them to adopt the National Action Plans (NAPs), involving civil society and equality bodies. **Aleksandra Wesoły** presented EU instruments such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network and other platforms which help combat radicalisation and extremist narratives. **Maria Daniella Marouda** said a study carried out by "European Commission against Racism and Intolerance" highlighted progress in the area of anti-discrimination legislation.

Joanna Goodey from the Fundamental Rights Agency stressed that while legislation does exist, data is lacking, and robust and regular data collection was needed for the action plan to succeed.

The rapporteur for the Committee of the Regions' opinion on the EU anti-racism action plan, **Yoomi Renström**, stressed that local and regional authorities needed to be recognised as strategic partners in designing, implementing and monitoring the NAPs.

Csaba Asztalos, president of the Romanian Council for the Combatting of Discrimination, underlined the importance of accessible databases and clear communication strategies, while **Marie Mescam** from SOS Racisme stressed the urgent need to create a space for dialogue within the EU, where civil society, equality bodies and anti-racism organisations can exchange experiences and share their knowledge.

Juliana Wahlgren, Senior Advocacy Officer from the European Network Against Racism, expressed the hope that engaging people with a minority racial or ethnic background with key expertise from civil society organisations would play a significant role in the effective implementation of the action plan. (mt)



The Western Balkans – The missing piece of the European puzzle

At its March plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee hosted a debate with **Olívér Várhelyi**, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, to discuss the state of play of the accession of the Western Balkan partners. EESC members voiced the conviction that integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU is a geostrategic investment in peace and economic growth.

The president of the EESC, **Christa Schweng**, opened the debate by stressing that the EESC attaches great importance to the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: *"Our Committee considers the Western Balkans as the missing piece of the puzzle in the European Union's ambition of creating a united and sustainable Europe, a Europe fit for the future,"* she said.

Óliver Várhelyi mentioned the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had had on the Western Balkans and stressed that *"the European Commission is determined to continue supporting our closest neighbours with all it means in these difficult times"*. Mr Várhelyi also presented the Commission's [Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#), a EUR 9 billion initiative with the twin objectives of kick-starting economic recovery and improving the region's convergence with the European Union. *"The plan's ambition is to boost not only the region's economic development, resilience and competitiveness, but also its social cohesion. We must work together to achieve this,"* stressed Mr Várhelyi.

The debate was followed by the adoption of an opinion on [Enhancing the accession process](#) – *A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*. The opinion rapporteur, **Andrej Zorko**, highlighted the importance of the enlargement process: *"Integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU represents a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth across the entire continent,"* he said. (dfg)



Discover what the EESC can do for you – NEW EDITION

The new edition of this publication provides a concise and up-to-date presentation of the European Economic and Social Committee as a unique forum for consultation, dialogue and consensus-building between representatives from all the different sectors of organised civil society, including employers, trade unions and groups such as professional and community associations, youth organisations, women's groups, consumers, environmental campaigners and many more.

The brochure also sets out the EESC's role and missions, explains how it operates and interacts with the EU law-making institutions and showcases some of its success stories.

Available in 23 EU official languages on the EESC's website at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/discover-what-eesc-can-do-you-2021-edition>

Hard copies can be requested from the EESC's Visits and Publications Unit: [vipcese@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:vipcse@eesc.europa.eu) (af)



Hasta luego, hombre!

David Gippini Fournier is leaving on 1 May 2021.

Dear David, your colleagues in the Press Unit would like to thank you for being such a pleasure to work with, for the class with which you carried out your tasks, for the generosity that you have shown in your personal and professional relationships and for your sense of diplomacy. You conduct your public relations with an elegance worthy of Humphrey Bogart.

How many times have you shown us your incredible ability to manage stress under extreme pressure!

It was a pleasure and a joy for us to work with you.

All the best!

Your colleagues from the Press Unit: Agata, Katerina, Ewa, Laura, Nicola, Millie, Daniela, Melissa, Margarida and Marco.



"A press officer with a touch of Galician irony"

I spent a great deal of time working with David Gippini, in particular, we worked on a number of press interviews together. When I met him in 2018, he struck me as a serious person. His contributions were always appropriate and very well thought out. He was very quick in his reasoning. Beyond work, I discovered an open person, generous with his time, with a touch of Galician irony, and I think we understood each other very well. We also had our friendly little "disagreements"; I am a firm advocate of inclusive language, while David is more academic and was not happy about certain liberties being taken with language. We talked about this often, in endless, rich and challenging conversations. But I must thank him for the rigour and beauty he brought to many of my texts.

I am sad to see him go, and I wish him every success in this new stage in his career. I have no doubt that he will be greatly missed by the Press Unit. And I will miss him, too.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



[A sustainable economic recovery is the only way to strengthen our Social Europe](#)

By the EESC Employers' Group

Ahead of the Social Summit in Porto next month, members of the Employers' Group met with Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights. During a frank and open debate, the Employers' Group president, Mr Mallia, stressed the need for a fast economic recovery, which is only possible if we ensure that our companies have the right business environment to be competitive, create jobs and consequently guarantee wellbeing for our societies.

In the midst of the worst economic recession since World War II, a sound economic recovery is both a prerequisite for and a way to facilitate social progress.

This means that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the Social Summit in Porto should not only be about social policy, but also about economic recovery and competitiveness.

Therefore, promoting job creation and participation in the labour market cannot be about new legislation or other obligations increasing the burden on companies. This approach has not worked in the past and will certainly not work in this dramatic economic crisis.

Instead, we need to focus on creating labour markets where flexibility and the ability of businesses to adapt to change are accompanied by adequate security for workers.

A vibrant industry and services sector and entrepreneurship remain central to Europe's future prosperity and wellbeing. We need a skilled and innovative workforce to embark on the digital and green transitions. Ensuring a competitive base for investments is fundamental to maintaining our social model.

EU legislation should be reserved for truly cross-border issues. When the EU legislates, all new initiatives at EU level should be better grounded in evidence and assessed on how they contribute to competitiveness. A new, targeted competitiveness check for all new initiatives would help to achieve this goal.

The Employers' Group met with Commissioner **Schmit** on 15 April. The discussion touched on a number of social issues, such as the EPSR action plan, the Porto Summit, the Commission's proposal on adequate minimum wages, and social dialogue and collective bargaining.

The full speech by Employers' Group president Mr **Mallia** to Commissioner **Schmit** can be found via this link: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/speech-president-mallia-eesc-employers-group-meeting-commissioner-schmit> (dv/kr)



[Adequate minimum wages are a key component of social cohesion](#)

By the EESC Workers' Group

Adequate minimum wages are a key component of social cohesion and combatting in-work poverty and inequality. However, many in Europe work under very harsh conditions, particularly precarious workers. And while in some countries collective bargaining is strong enough to ensure good working conditions, that is not the case everywhere.

The absence of social protection brings dire consequences, particularly when other problems mount, as is currently the case with the brutal health and social crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, the [European Commission proposal for a directive on an adequate minimum wage in the European Union](#) aims to ensure no one in Europe works without a decent living wage, and that collective bargaining is strengthened and extended, all while respecting the Member States' different traditions in social dialogue. Through national action plans, agreed in a tripartite process with the social partners, upward wage convergence can be attained while combatting pay discrimination of any kind, as well as in-work poverty.

Considering the urgency of the proposal, particularly with the difficulties caused by COVID-19, rapporteur **Cinzia del Rio** commented: "All workers should get a fair and adequate minimum wage, either set by law or collective bargaining, to allow a decent life and access to social protection. Social and wage dumping, deep wage inequalities, rising in-work poverty, which mostly affects young people, women and disadvantaged groups, have to be addressed with a strong European commitment".

The [EESC opinion on the proposed directive](#), adopted on 25 March 2021 by the EESC plenary, recognises the urgency and need for such a set of measures, the adequacy of and legal grounds for a directive (also corroborated by the [EU Council legal assessment](#)), and the clauses ensuring respect for the autonomy of social partners. (prp)



[Civil society organisations must be the drivers of change in post COVID-19 societies and economies](#)

By the EESC Diversity Europe Group

At a recent conference of the Diversity Europe Group, civil society representatives urged their organisations to tell politicians what type of society they want to create and live in.

Participants at the conference on [Civil Society Organisations during and after COVID-19: what challenges and what future?](#) argued that **policy cohesion and a meaningful involvement of citizens are key**. They called for a holistic and integrated approach to policy-making which actively promotes EU values, the well-being of its people and bottom-up initiatives which respect the opinions and rights of EU citizens. Leveraging new forms of solidarity and social activism that sprung to life during the pandemic will be crucial in this.

Séamus Boland, Diversity Europe Group president, highlighted the outstanding engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs) and encouraged them and citizens to actively engage in reconstructing and rebuilding post-COVID-19 communities and societies.

"Now is the right **time to re-think our growth and governance models** and to balance economic prosperity with social inclusion, human capital, sustainability and well-being," said **Mr Boland**, who also set out two conditions for a real shift: "A holistic and integrated approach to policy-making and civil society involvement in the design and delivery of the new world."

The Group president urged EU and national authorities to work with CSOs as partners and emphasised that civil society and public authorities must continue to defend democratic governance, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Read all the conference conclusions and recommendations [here](#). (jk)

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



[Europe Day 2021](#)

The EESC traditionally celebrates Europe Day by opening its doors to the public. This year, due to the COVID-19 crisis, citizens from across Europe and the world are invited to discover the House of Civil Society in a safe and virtual way.

Europe Day on 9 May commemorates the date of the Schuman Declaration, which was the starting point for today's European Union. It is a chance to reflect on what solidarity has built and what we hope to achieve in the future.

It is also a chance to make EU citizens feel even more strongly that they are part of something bigger, as expressed in the Europe Day slogan, shared by all European institutions, "Stronger TOGETHER".

Be part of Europe Day and...

- **Discover what the EESC does for you** through a 3D 360-degree virtual visit of the EESC: find out who we are and what we do, and learn about the added value of the EESC and its members.
- **Discover what EESC members do back home** through stories from our members' organisations on the ground, and see what EESC members are doing in their local areas to help the EU recover from the crisis.
- **Visit our Culture Corner** and discover the EESC's various virtual exhibitions in an interactive and interesting way.
- **Take part in our many live activities:** Europe Day is first and foremost a celebration of peace and unity in Europe, so games and fun activities will take place online, including virtual visits of the EESC, a live webinar with EESC members, a digital photo booth, and picture competition.

Stay tuned!

[Europe Day 2021 | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#) (cl)

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