

September 2021 | EN

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WE CAN ALL MAKE A DIFFERENCE



We can all make a difference

Dear readers,

September feels like a new year to me. Much more than January. September marks the end of the summer break and a return to routines of work, meetings, travel or school. This year I feel this even more than usual. Vaccination rates are giving us hope that we can again move around our regions and our continent. New cultural norms of behaviour and hygiene practices have combined to give us the possibility of a new beginning.

Already we are approaching next month the one year anniversary of this new mandate for the EESC. And yet many members will make their first visit to our building in Brussels this month and next.

There is a sense of expectation and opportunity. Civil society needs to raise its voice and be heard clearly. That's where the EESC can continue to make a difference.

We have faced a difficult 18 months with this pandemic. We have faced a difficult summer with devastation across many parts of Europe as a direct consequence of climate change. Extreme flooding tragically resulting in loss of life (210 lives lost, mostly in Germany) and huge disruption to people's lives. Damage and loss of life from flooding was also experienced across Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Italy and in particular Greece experienced wildfires that reflected the dry conditions of the land. The extraordinary temperature of 47.1 Celsius was reached in Greece. The images of parts of Europe under water and others on fire shows us the urgency of our need to come together to solve our challenges. Fire fighters from Germany, Poland, Romania and others rushed to offer assistance to the Greeks in a strong show of solidarity.

In the months ahead we have a busy schedule. The Conference on the Future of Europe will see all our members busy bringing all voices to the Conference. The slogan 'The future is in your hands' reminds us that only through active participation can the future we need be designed.

To facilitate this, I look forward to our Connecting EU event in Lisbon in November. This is an EESC initiative to stimulate our active network of civil society actors all over Europe. We typically have

120 participants, including communications representatives from civil society networks, COCOM members, journalists and other institutions. I am pleased to also remind you of our Civil Society Prize, which this year will reward those active on climate action.

We can all make a difference. Let's make the most of the opportunities to engage, and ensure we are both active and effective.

Cillian Lohan

EESC Vice-President for communication

DIARY DATES

20 September 2021, Brussels

Volunteers – citizens building the future of Europe

22-23 September 2021, Brussels

EESC plenary session

30 September – 1 October 2021, North Macedonia

8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

1 October 2021, Brussels

30 years defending European consumers

ONE QUESTION TO...



One question to…

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

For the September edition, we asked Alain Coheur, president of the Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT), to comment on the challenges of the industrial strategy.

One question to Alain Coheur, president of the Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT):

"In May 2021, the European Commission published the communication *Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy: Building a stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery*. It focuses on the functioning of the internal market during the pandemic. What are the most important tasks that the EESC intends to undertake in connection with this strategy, which includes lessons learnt from the health crisis and takes into account its impact on the economy and industry? What do you expect from civil society in terms of applying the principles of the industrial strategy?"

"The Green Industrial Strategy as a cornerstone of the European Green Deal"

The new industrial strategy, *Updating the New Industrial Strategy for Europe* [COM(2021) 350 final], published on 5 May, is undoubtedly one of the key challenges for the EU. The only way for Member States to overcome this crisis is by acting in a coordinated manner, leaving no one behind and restoring companies' capacity to generate added value, invest in a sustainable future and maintain/create quality jobs.

At the EESC, on the initiative of the INT section and with the support of all section presidents, we have worked together to prepare a series of seminars looking at topics linked to the industrial strategy, in line with each section's competences. These seminars take the form of webinars.

On 13 July, the CCMI organised the first webinar on *The role of Critical Raw Materials to form a strong industrial base*. The next webinar will take place on 15 September, on the topic of *The EU's Industrial strategy – which indicators to track its progress?* The upcoming webinars will be organised as follows:

• 18 October 2021 – ECO webinar: *Channelling financial resources into investments that comply with environmental, social and governance criteria.*

• 26 November 2021 – SOC webinar: *A Just Transition for workers of European industries: tackling inequalities and discrimination and fostering opportunities for reskilling and upskilling.*

• 10 December 2021 – NAT webinar: *Farm to Fork Strategy – Aligning the food industry with the European Green Deal's climate neutrality objectives and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

• January 2022 – TEN webinar: *Clean energy sources for the transition to a carbon-neutral economy.*

• February 2022 – REX webinar: *Sustainable supply chains and the case of reshoring.*

This series of events will end in March 2022, and will close with a high level conference on *A Sustainable Future for European Industry.* This conference will be organised together with the European Commission, with the participation of Commission Vice-President **Margrethe Vestager** and Commissioner **Thierry Breton**, as well as the future French presidency.

This new strategy involves a number of challenges, but I would like to highlight the following key aspects:

Shifting to a carbon-neutral economy is essential, as is reversing the current curve of biodiversity collapse. Without a green industrial strategy as a cornerstone of the Green Deal, the EU will never succeed in reaching a carbon-neutral economy within one generation.

The new industrial strategy must ensure the right balance between supporting European businesses, respecting our 2050 climate-neutrality objective and providing consumers with incentives to switch from consumption to sustainable goods and services.

The circular economy is key for developing Europe's future economic model. This model must explore viable and economical alternatives to fossil fuels and give more weight to decentralised and cooperative clean energy solutions.

Industrial policy must go hand in hand with a firm trade and foreign policy, which in turn must develop strategies to secure access to raw materials. In addition, the health sector as a whole needs special attention.

European industry needs to be digitalised or it will cease to exist. Investments in ICT sectors such as the data-driven economy, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge manufacturing must reach all regions and Member States.

SMEs will probably be the hardest hit by this crisis. They need help to develop, to develop new economic models and attract a new skilled workforce, for example through the introduction of stock options for employees.

Alain Coheur

President of the Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT)

GUESS WHO IS OUR GUEST..



The surprise guest

Every month we will be introducing a public figure whose work and commitment are seen by others as a source of inspiration.

For the September edition, we have invited **Sébastien Maillard**, Director of the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris. He shares with us his understanding of what it means to have a sense of "belonging to Europe", which is particularly important at this time of debate on the future of Europe, which will culminate in the French Presidency in the first half of 2022.

Sébastien Maillard is Director of the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris. With a team of 20 employees, this think tank analyses European issues and formulates operational ideas for advancing European integration in several key sectors, in conjunction with its partners in Berlin and Brussels. Its *Académie Notre Europe* raises awareness of European issues amongst 18- to 30-year-olds.

After an initial career as a journalist for *La Croix*, Mr Maillard joined the think tank founded by Jacques Delors, a former president of the European Commission. He was the correspondent in Brussels (2007-2010) and Rome (2013-2016), co-heading the international service, and he covered Emmanuel Macron's campaign in 2017. A specialist in European affairs, which he has taught at Sciences Po in Paris and for Boston College, he has also worked with *TheWorldPost*, *The German Times* and other newspapers and magazines. He is a member of several European organisations (*Mouvement Européen, Maison Robert Schuman* and *Maison de l'Europe*). He is the author of *Qu'avons-nous fait de l'Europe?*, 2013, with a preface by Jacques Delors) and of a book of interviews with Enrico Letta, *Faire l'Europe dans un monde de brutes*, 2017, which came out in paperback in 2019 and has been translated into several languages. (ehp)



Sébastien Maillard: Did you say "belonging"?

"Belonging" is the last of the three keywords announced to signal the French EU Council Presidency, but the one that is raising the most eyebrows. What are we talking about here?

In a nutshell, we are talking about that special something that makes you feel European, a sense of being of this continent and of belonging to it. It cannot be imposed by law or bought. The parts of France that have done so well out of subsidies 'from Brussels' are not necessarily Europe's greatest fans. But this feeling, which is both individual and collective, needs to be stimulated, nourished and allowed to mature.

How can this be done? Belonging to Europe can be understood in three ways. The most obvious meaning, but one which we often lose sight of, is belonging in the sense of — let's have the courage to say it — a civilisation. You may have seen it this summer, if you were able to travel. In the streets of Rome, Prague, Lisbon or Athens, in town squares, in cathedrals, around cafés or opera houses: this family-like atmosphere, which is more than just a diversity of styles and languages. These traces of a collective memory that goes beyond its national borders and joins ours. Without levelling out, merging together or standardising anything. Without taking anything away from national and/or regional attachments, which develop in their own way. To be European simply means not feeling like an exile when spending time in these cities — at least less so than on other continents. This requires an educational system that incorporates the European dimension.

But belonging is also a matter of citizenship: recognising oneself as a real European citizen, and not only during the European elections. This means that we have to be able to recognise the democratic legitimacy of

a European directive that has been voted on and not to see it as a '*diktat* imposed by Brussels', to use the euro as *our own* currency and not see it as something foreign. More broadly, it means recognising ourselves as belonging to the European Union and not just to the State that is a member of it. In practice, this form of belonging is based first and foremost on how we are informed about European affairs by the media. Do European Commissioners, MEPs - and EESC members - have a place in our political sphere or are they non-existent?

Lastly, the third way of belonging to Europe is to feel one's destiny linked to that of one's neighbours, to hold the same vision of the future, to share the same ideals. The term "making Europe" is particularly relevant here. Building Europe, generally speaking, means instilling it with great ambition: originally it was about establishing peace and unity; today it means standing up to the rest of the world, combating global warming and upholding democracy in the face of authoritarianism. In short, one does not feel European just by looking at old stones, by adhering to the same standards; it is also about subscribing to the same values and geopolitical interests.

All too often, these three approaches to belonging are viewed in isolation from each other. The first focuses on the past, the second on the present and the third on the future. The first speaks to historians and artists, the second to economists and lawyers, the third to philosophers and strategists. The challenge of successfully belonging is to draw these three approaches together, not to pit them against one another. Or, rather, to see how they are intertwined. We would not be 'making Europe' if it did not already exist as a civilisation and did not have the EU as a means of making its presence felt in the world. Linking these three dimensions and aligning them with each other is where the challenge of creating a sense of European belonging lies. This will require much more than a rotating presidency.

Sébastien Maillard

Director of the Institut Jacques Delors, Paris



Herman van Rompuy: Le vieux poète parle doucement

Nous avons le plaisir de poursuivre la publication de la 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.

Chant et chuchotements

Entendre les oreilles ouvertes

Le monde est loin

***

Lire lentement au bord de mer

Les vagues meurent tout près

De longs soupirs

***

Les arbres et la mer

Donnent vie au vent

Souffle et rage



Herman van Rompuy: The old poet speaks gently

We are delighted to host yet another selection of haikus by Herman van Rompuy, former President of the European Council. These haikus were originally written in French.

Singing and whispering

Hearing with open ears

The world is far away

***

Reading slowly by the sea

The waves are dying nearby

Long sighs

***

The trees and the sea

Give life to the wind

Blowing and raging

EESC NEWS



AI: while 18% of the world's top-tier researchers are European only 10% work in Europe

The World Economic Forum's Jayant Narayan flagged up the figure in a debate on Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the European Economic and Social Committee's July plenary session, saying that to compete Europe needs to invest in medium- to long-term actions to create an ecosystem where AI can thrive.

The EESC's last plenary session before the summer break included a debate on ***Artificial Intelligence and real values: our digital future*** with **Jayant Narayan**, leader of the World Economic Forum's Global AI Alliance.

Focusing on the challenges facing SMEs looking to deploy AI, **Jayant Narayan** stressed that while new solutions were starting to emerge such as no-code AI, which allows companies and individuals to work on AI solutions without having fully trained data scientists on their payrolls, this was no silver bullet. There also needed to be a medium- to long-term focus on empowering SMEs to develop the necessary local, in-house capacity to deploy AI. That was where essential aspects such as skills came into play, which, in the case of AI and data science, could not be developed overnight. Funding and support for innovation played a key role in this process.

When asked why Europe was lagging behind the US and China, **Mr Narayan** said that while there were multiple reasons for this, government support and funding had played a major role, from the emergence of Silicon Valley to the bipartisan approval of the recent Innovation and Competition Act, entailing a USD 250 billion spend on technology and innovation.

"That funding creates the kind of market where most of your top researchers and data scientists will end up as well. And this is not a short-term solution, but more of a medium- to long-term view of creating an ecosystem where you don't just generate local value, but you also lead in it". He quoted recent studies showing that Europe was home to 18% of the world's top tier AI scientists, only 10% actually work in Europe.

Mr Narayan also addressed the question of AI and civil society and whether AI development was truly for all or was rather serving the interests of certain groups.

Quoting studies which show that between 30 and 40% of Amazon's recent revenue came though AI-driven recommendations to consumers, **Mr Narayan** stressed that AI is indeed very pervasive, and that this was why robustness, explainability, trust and transparency were so essential. Progress was being made on explainability and safety, but through cutting edge solutions which not everyone could be expected to have

access to.

While there was no lack of principles "out there", he said the biggest concern was whether they were truly being put into practice and civil society's interests safeguarded. He predicted that progress in implementation would come from a mixture of public sector regulation and industry frameworks. Through dialogue between industry and regulators things would evolve, possibly reaching a point where industry would start taking action even on a voluntary basis. (dm)



Frans Timmermans meets European youth leaders at the EESC

The EESC opinion on structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process proposed the establishment of a Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Table, to be hosted by the EESC in conjunction with the European Commission, European Parliament and youth organisations.

The Commission welcomed the initiative as a useful tool to strengthen the EESC's consultative role and give the younger generation an opportunity to share its views on the European Green Deal. The first meeting, with 11 youth representatives, took place on 13 July 2021, attended by Executive Vice-President **Frans Timmermans**.

"Thanks to you, the sense of urgency in our population is greater. We all have to work hard without expecting it to be for our own benefit, but rather for that of future generations. Some of you may think that we are not doing enough, but I promise I'm pushing as far as I can, and hopefully we can find some common ground to fight the good fight", emphasised Vice-President **Timmermans**.

During the meeting, the young representatives presented Mr Timmermans with a paper, initiated by Generation Climate Europe and the European Youth Forum, with specific proposals relating to the EU economic system, including the EU's management of natural resources and progress indicators.

Cillian Lohan, EESC Vice-President concluded: "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redress systemic inequalities and transition away from unsustainable practices. However, young people need support. The ecosystem of activism needs encouragement, nourishing, and real space in the EU policy arena. Spaces for dialogue are only valuable if they are followed by action. Let's do it!" (mr)



The economy, the environment and people's well-being must go hand in hand in post-COVID EU

Economic prosperity, care for the environment and people's well-being can and must go hand in hand. This was the key message delivered by the EESC president, Christa Schweng, at the debate on *A post-COVID economy that works for all - Towards a well-being economy?* held at the EESC plenary session on 7 July 2021.

Ms Schweng argued that in future, we would clearly need to monitor and value broader aspects than those reflected in GDP: "*Aspects such as our health, our nature, our education, our ability to innovate and our communities really matter,*" she said.

Referring to "*combining the idea of prosperity with the possibility of social progress on a global scale*", with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as the foundation, Ms Schweng added: "*The time has come for the EU to work on a comprehensive strategy: the EESC is ready to support the reflection on the foundations for a post-COVID economy that works for all and includes new indicators for economic performance and social progress that can provide a comprehensive picture of people's well-being.*"

Peter Schmidt, president of the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment (NAT) and rapporteur for the EESC opinion on *The sustainable economy we need*, pointed out that a well-being economy was based on serving people and that the EU must take the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to reflect on our weaknesses and come up with proposals. (mp)



Europe stands to gain from the sound funding of #NextGenerationEU

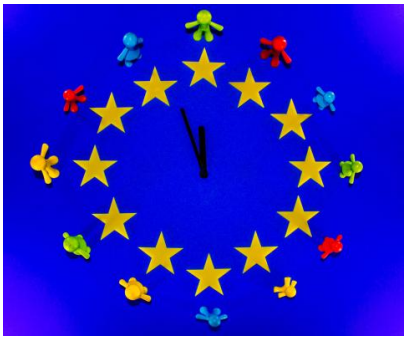
A well-functioning funding strategy is key when raising the money for the European Union's recovery on international capital markets. In its opinion, drawn up by Judith Vorbach and adopted at the July plenary session, the Committee stresses that the smooth implementation of NextGenerationEU requires sound and sustainable funding, along with solid risk management and low borrowing costs.

Speaking during the debate, **Ms Vorbach** said: "Borrowing under NextGenerationEU has to be done with democratic control, legitimacy and transparency. An effective funding strategy made up of stable and sustainable funding, solid risk management as well as high creditworthiness and low borrowing costs is in the public interest and

especially in the interest of civil society, which ultimately bears the market risks".

According to the EESC, the European Commission's choice to strengthen its own competences and human resources in order to deal with the funding of NextGenerationEU comes as good news. Given the strong public interest in sound funding, it is important that the strategy is managed directly by the Commission and is not outsourced. The EESC calls for a gender balance when appointing staff to the task.

The Committee also calls for the establishment of an advisory board, on which the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council, social partners and organised civil society are represented. (mp)



Ending poverty for European children needs a whole-society approach

The Commission's latest initiatives on children's rights call on European and national policy-makers to work towards the common good of all children growing up in the EU. The two initiatives are ambitious and bold in their approach to ensuring a life free from any discrimination for each and every child and have won the EESC's approval.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has given its backing to the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and to the proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the legally binding EU Child Guarantee. The EESC believes that implementing these initiatives would support efforts at EU and national level to promote children's well-being and reduce child poverty.

In the opinion on the **European Child Guarantee,** adopted at the plenary session in July, the EESC stressed that the fight against child poverty, discrimination, deprivation and social exclusion required a coordinated European and whole-society approach, ensuring that children's rights are mainstreamed into different policies and that these policies have empowering and long-lasting effects on children's health and well-being.

"The figure of one in four children in the EU growing up at risk of poverty is unacceptable. We need strong policies and legal frameworks to break the often intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and reverse this trend. We need to have an ambitious target that aims to lift all children out of poverty by 2030 and not just five million children, which is currently the poverty target under the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)," stated the rapporteur for the opinion, **Kinga Joó**.

Children require attention from all layers of society. Consolidating their rights should be a priority for the EU. To this end, we need an inclusive, cross-cutting and intersectional strategy, a true policy based on equity, to ensure equal opportunities and inclusion for all children, regardless of their circumstances," said co-rapporteur **Maria del Carmen Barrera Chamorro.**

According to Eurostat data for 2019, 18 million children, or 22.2%, were growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU. Digital and energy poverty are equally detrimental to children and should also be tackled within the Child Guarantee, according to the EESC. Some 5.4% of school-aged children in Europe live in households without a computer or an internet connection. Some 25% of Europeans live in energy-poor households, which also affects children's quality of life and health.

To lift European children out of poverty, the EESC recommended that all Member States allocate at least 5% of ESF+ funding for that purpose. According to the new regulation, only those Member States in which child poverty surpasses the EU average of 23.4% are required to earmark this percentage of their ESF+ financial resources to combat it. So far, this has been done by only 11 countries.(ll)



Roaming: the EESC calls for a single tariff zone across the EU

People should enjoy the local rate when using their mobile phones wherever they are in the EU, said the European Economic and Social Committee in an opinion recently adopted on a proposed overhaul of the EU roaming rules.

A single tariff zone, offering calls and data consumption at local rates to all people who have a phone subscription in Europe, with the same speed and access to infrastructure whichever country the call is made to or from: this, in the EESC's view, is the goal that the EU should pursue in regulating roaming services.

While welcoming the European Commission's proposed review of the roaming regulation and its goals as a positive step in the right direction, the EESC believes a bolder objective should be set.

"The idea behind the Commission's proposal is that roaming services should be provided under the same conditions as they are at home, without any restrictions on access. This is a good proposal," said **Christophe Lefèvre**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion adopted at the July plenary session. "However, we believe that we should go beyond conditions and ensure that people in Europe do not have to pay more for their mobile communications when they go abroad."

The EESC also stresses that it is not enough to stipulate that, when similar quality or speeds are available on another Member State's network, the domestic operator should not deliberately provide a lower quality roaming service. This means, for instance, that if a consumer has 4G connectivity at home, they should not have to use 3G while roaming if 4G is available in the country they travel to.

Part of the problem is poor local infrastructure, which is why the EU should also be ready to invest in infrastructure to fill existing gaps and ensure that there are no "white spots", i.e. regions that have inadequate broadband internet coverage, many of which are known to be located in rural areas and drive away potential residents and businesses.

In addition, the EESC insists on the need to require multiple alerts to be sent to consumers to protect them from bill shocks. When approaching the limits of their subscriptions, the operator should keep alerting the

consumer whenever the volume set for the previous alert has been consumed again, particularly during the same call or data use session.

Finally, the EESC points to the issue of fair use as crucial. While all mobile communications contracts mention fair use in connection with roaming, the EESC regrets that the regulation fails to define it. With the COVID-19 pandemic people have come to rely hugely on online activities and fair use has taken on a whole new meaning. Think what that means for an Erasmus student attending a university abroad, following classes on Teams, Zoom or some other platform, argues the EESC. That uses up a lot of data, and they will quickly reach their monthly ceiling. Fairness would be for people in such a situation to have the same ceiling in the country they are visiting as they have in their home country. (dm)



EESC supports an open, sustainable and assertive EU trade policy

The new trade strategy launched by the Commission brings principles of engagement to the table that will support the EU in achieving its domestic and external policy objectives. Alongside this, the modernisation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) will be the key to delivering for future generations.

"*We need to have a clear approach, to be open and assertive, to improve stakeholders' engagement with trade policy because the narrative of international trade is changing*," said **Timo Vuori**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the trade policy review.

It is time for Europe to put naivety aside and adopt a more assertive profile when defending EU values and trade commitments unilaterally. Where the WTO cannot act or fully deliver, the EU should be able to count on a wide range of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that reflect European principles and the international standards shared with leading and emerging economies in international trade.

As **Christophe Quarez**, co-rapporteur for the opinion, put it: "*All of the work needs to be put in the context of multilateralism and reforming the WTO*".

The EESC agrees that modernising the WTO is a top priority. The EU must therefore take the lead on ambitious WTO reforms by breaking taboos on social and climate aspects of trade.

Trade policy that delivers for people

The EESC welcomes the trade agenda, which responds to some of the stakeholder concerns. However, it lacks due consideration of how to improve the involvement of civil society.

The Committee underlines the need for continued cooperation with civil society at national and EU level, to ensure that trade policy adds value to our daily lives.

Civil society has to become an active partner in trade policy, from shaping to monitoring trade tools and agreements.

The EESC strongly supports the EU taking an active role in shaping global rules for more sustainable and fairer trade that would bring prosperity and security not only to business partners but also to countries and their people. (at)



EESC welcomes its first meeting with the Argentinian Economic and Social Council

This first meeting between the Argentinian Economic and Social Council (ESC) and the EESC, organised by the REX section, was led by Christa Schweng, EESC president, and Gustavo Beliz, president of the Argentinian ESC.

In his opening remarks, the president of the Argentinian ESC, **Gustavo Beliz**, summarised the newly established ESC's first one hundred days and said:

"*In our council, we bring together people with very different views, including very different ideological views, very diverse life experiences and a wide range of social backgrounds. This diversity is the council's greatest asset. In these first one hundred days, we have shown great respect and have been very committed to our work. We would like to continue in the same vein with the EESC at our side, so we are very pleased to have this opportunity.*"

Christa Schweng, president of the EESC, congratulated Argentina for setting up an institution enabling civil society organisations to voice their opinions and put forward policy proposals. "*We are delighted to know that Argentina has set up an economic and social council that will focus on key issues such as social inclusion, the environment and climate change, work, innovative democracy and food security. Argentina is a country with which we share a lot of values and interests, including understanding the importance of civil society participation*."

More than 90 members from both parties, representing various sectors, attended the meeting and participated in a lively discussion covering a wide range of issues and strategies. The debate focused on the priorities for the post COVID-19 recovery, the EU's Green Deal, education and jobs of the future and on the impact of new technologies on the labour market.

Both organisations emphasised the importance of councils for building consensus, finding solutions to social problems and ways to deal with such problems firmly rooted in participatory democracy. (at)



The external dimension of migration needs to be anchored in the EU's foreign policy

Building talent partnerships with countries of origin and transit is a key policy in addressing migration. Europe must shift the focus of migration policy's external dimension and make it part of a broader geopolitical and geo-economic agenda that will be given its rightful place among other policies.

"*Today we are talking about how geopolitics touches upon migration. A big wave of migrants to Europe will be coming from Africa*", underlined the president of the REX section **Dimitris Dimitriadis** at the meeting held in July 2021.

As of January 2020, an estimated 23 million out of the 447 million people living in the EU are third-country nationals, representing 5% of the European population.

While the new pact on migration and asylum is still advocating talent partnerships with the countries of origin, transit and destination, it seems that there are blockages preventing its effective implementation.

Jean-Louis De Brower from the European Affairs programme at the Egmont Institute commented that there is probably a lack of trust in and solidarity towards the new pact.

Estrella Gallan, representing the Spanish Commission for Refugees, also pointed out that the issues of migration and asylum fall on the shoulders of the entry countries and should be dealt with in a more proportionate manner, based on shared responsibility and solidarity.

Development policy in Africa can put a stop to illegal migration

A positive contribution to development in Africa, which is vulnerable to climate change, could bring social, political and economic stability.

In the words of MEP **Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana**, 1st vice-chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Development, "*Development policies are inextricably linked to migration*".

Adding to that, **Dr Chiyoge B. Sifa**, from the International Co-operative Alliance Africa, underscored the importance of the ICA-EU partnership, which plays a significant role in discouraging young people from taking the Mediterranean routes. (at)



Employers and trade unions join with NGOs: climate change preparation is now urgent

The new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change is a crucial step towards achieving climate neutrality and resilience by 2050.

European civil society strongly supports the Commission's commitment to strengthening efforts on climate proofing, resilience building, prevention and preparedness.

In its opinion on the new strategy, adopted at the plenary session in July, the EESC stressed that adaptation, with equity at its core, is critical to protecting European citizens' lives and livelihoods, especially those of the most vulnerable, so that we leave no one behind.

The EESC therefore stresses the need for an equal emphasis on financing mitigation and adaptation, as well as specific adaptation guidelines, monitoring tools, benchmarks and indicators. Such tools will help provide transparency, and assess the progress of climate adaptation, while building local, national and regional capacity.

The bioeconomy and the transition to a circular economy are essential and concrete climate adaptation approaches as Europe recovers.

"The EU needs to further enable and emphasise the importance of innovation, investment and trade that enhance sustainable development. Climate adaptation and its costs must also be an integral part of the EU's industrial strategy", says **Dimitris Dimitriadis**, EESC rapporteur for this opinion.

In order for the Union to emerge as a global standard-setter in the field of sustainable finance, the Commission should keep the bar high and follow science-based and technology-neutrality principles, including in the EU Taxonomy. (mr)



Multimodal freight transport: let's make it happen!

Moving goods using a combination of water and land transportation will be easier in Europe as soon as problems affecting intermodality are solved. In the opinion drafted by Stefan Back and adopted at the July plenary session, the EESC notes that lack of interoperability and poor infrastructure have a major impact on the development of integrated freight transport, often leaving operators no choice other than to use road transport. This in turn has a negative knock-on effect on the environment.

Commenting on the adoption of the opinion, **Mr Back** pointed out that the EU needed a pragmatic, resource-efficient approach from a regulatory point of view: "We need to address the pending issues directly and solve them quickly. Multimodal transport and logistics must be efficient and sustainable, not more expensive, slower and less reliable than, in particular, unimodal road transport. A long-term viable solution cannot be built just by setting up a new dedicated regulatory framework or injecting new financial resources."

Currently, multimodal freight transport lacks efficiency and sustainability. Combining different modes of transport on water and land nowadays entails considerable expense due to transhipment and transaction costs, on top of disadvantages such as long delivery times, complexity, higher risk and less reliability. Given all of the above, multimodal transport is not at present very attractive. In order to play its full part in the transport system, multimodal transport must become competitive in its own right and achieve efficient and seamless flows at the same cost as unimodal transport. (mp)



EESC calls for rapid implementation of EU synergies between civil, defence and space industries

The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the proposed EU Action Plan on synergies between civil, defence and space industries. The action plan can enhance Europe's strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, improve the public security and boost competitiveness, economic growth and employment. Therefore, the EESC calls for rapid, forceful and ambitious implementation of the 11 actions set out in a Plan.

The EESC has adopted an opinion on the **EU action plan on synergies between civil, defence and space industries,** giving its take on the European Commission's Action Plan, which is set to improve synergies between EU-funded instruments, while facilitating cross-fertilisation between the civil, defence and space industries.

One of the most important and longest lasting innovations in the automobile industry originated in the defence industry here in Europe. After working on ejector seats in fighter jets for a European aeronautics company, Nils Ivar Bohlin, a Swedish mechanical engineer, went on to design a new seat belt for a European car company. Inspired by the harness jet pilots used, the three-point seat belt became a global standard in the car industry and has saved more than one million lives since its introduction.

The EESC considers the Action Plan to be a pillar in the EU's industrial strategy, and this example illustrates how it can ensure cross-fertilisation between the civil, defence and space industries and can focus on improving the crucial link between space, defence and security.

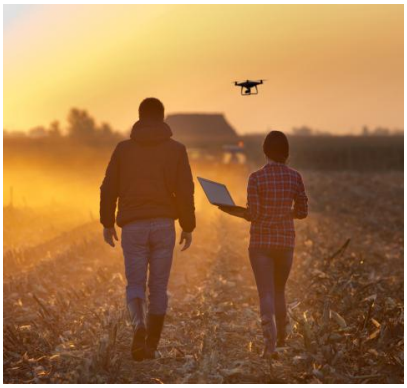
''Among other things, one key priority should be the adoption of new digital and other emerging technologies in defence and security", said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Manuel Garcia Salgado**. "To facilitate this, it should be ensured that relevant civil initiatives take into account defence and security requirements from the outset; this will also help optimise the scope and efficiency of defence- and security-specific funding instruments."

Diversity is essential for innovation, including in the defence and space industries. The EESC therefore calls for greater inclusion of women and young people, through recruitment, staff retention and promotion policies.

"Europe today is a global leader in technology, but this leadership is increasingly being challenged by massive investment from the US and China in new digital and other emerging technologies such as AI, IoT, Blockchain, etc.", says co-rapporteur, **Jan Pie**. "This challenges Europe's competitiveness, but also its autonomy in strategic sectors like security or defence.''

''The topic is definitely an example of how to pursue healthy, non-aggressive technological sovereignty'', says **Pietro de Lotto**, president of the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change. (ks)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



EESC Employers' Group calls for a Digital Rural Act

By EESC Employers' Group

At its July extraordinary meeting, the Employers' Group urged the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, to propose a Digital Rural Act (DRA).

A DRA would facilitate the development of digital technologies in agriculture and rural areas, thus improving the effectiveness of the Common Agriculture Policy and supporting the EU Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategies.

"The COVID-19 crisis has shown that bridging the urban-rural digital divide is imperative if we want to make digital a genuine lever for sustainable development throughout our continent. The deployment of fibre and 5G is crucial in cities as much as in rural areas," said Employers' Group Vice-President **Arnold Puech d'Alissac.** "But the CAP cannot finance all the needs of the rural world, including its digital needs. Other budgets need to come to the rescue in order not to deplete the CAP," he added. "The national recovery and resilience plans can help bridge the divide," but we need a more structured plan, he reiterated.

The Commissioner said that digitalisation was high on the Commission's agenda, and was reflected both in the headline ambition for the digital age and more recently in the proposal for a Compass for the digital decade.

"Digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas can be regarded as instrumental, not only to strengthen the competitiveness of the sector and rural communities, but also to contribute to several sustainability-related policy objectives. This includes, of course, environmental and socio-economic sustainability," the Commissioner said, pointing to how digital technologies can transform agriculture by helping farmers to

work more precisely, efficiently and sustainably, for example, in the use of nutrients and through tailored animal welfare measures.

Rural Europe has to play a fundamental role in this new post-pandemic call for social cohesion and sustainability, in line with the strategies proposed by the European Commission (Climate Change, EU Green Deal, Farm to Fork, Biodiversity), as well as with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The agri-food sector is the engine of the European economy. The EU has 294 000 agri-food companies, which generate a turnover of EUR 1.192 billion euros and employ 4.72 million people, making it the largest manufacturing sector in the EU. The agri-food sector also benefits from an external trade surplus worth EUR 36 billion.

"At the EESC, we have been defending the great potential for innovation, provided that sufficient resources are allocated for investment in infrastructure and digitalisation. European farmers are ready to commit to the transitions, but they will not be able to do so without proper incentives, without a level-playing field with imported products and without support for resilience," said **Stefano Mallia**, President of the Employers' Group.

Overall, digitalisation is an important factor in keeping younger generations, including young farmers and other entrepreneurs, in rural areas. "The steps we take in the coming years must be taken together. As employers and entrepreneurs, your leadership and initiative will prove invaluable on the path that we take. I look forward to working with you closely, and I am confident that we can achieve our shared goal of a prosperous and sustainable Europe," the Commissioner added.

Find the full meeting with **Commissioner Wojciechowski** here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAPQvk8wGXE (dv/kr)



Conference on the Future of Europe: hopes and risks for a future that might end too soon

By the EESC Workers' Group

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a truly special occasion, a key moment, in the much-needed creation of a genuine European public sphere. Reaching out to citizens, engaging with civil society, with trade unions and business organisations, is fundamental to its success. The issues to be discussed, ranging from European democracy to social justice, from jobs to the environment, from migration to climate change, are key challenges of the present and future for our continent and our countries.

Such an ambitious agenda raises expectations, and with good reason. However, hope is a double-edged sword, and if these grand topics are not transformed into real debates and practical proposals, if they do not manage to involve citizens beyond the Brussels bubble and engage with citizens and workers across Europe,

hope can quickly turn into disappointment. This risks adding to the climate of disaffection embodied by the rise of extremism and populism. Political discussion is a lengthy process, particularly if ordinary citizens are asked to discuss very complex matters. And while this is, again, an opportunity, the short period scheduled for the Conference as a whole, and the brief content that has been made available to date, limited to a few outlines of the inaugural plenary session, warns us of the danger of completing the conference with not much but a series of general ideas and declarations.

A fundamental part of the Conference are the Citizens' Panels, randomly put together from citizens chosen across Member States to be a representative sample of our citizenry. However, with the first panel taking place this September, there is still no information on what exactly will be discussed, as the results of the first interim report, made by an external contractor on the basis of online contributions, is yet to be published. This certainly has the potential to bring outside ideas into the political discussion, but it also risks discussing too many disparate issues or overlooking fundamental ones, depending on online participation in earlier months and the criteria of the external contractor. With the end of the Conference set for March, and only three meetings scheduled per panel, the danger of dissipation is again very real. Another fundamental issue, particularly on the representative side of the political process, is that of the CoFoE Plenary Working Groups and the plenaries, in which EESC members will be involved. Their start date is nearing, and yet no information, aside from the titles of the groups, is available.

In order to develop its full potential, and to reach beyond the Brussels bubble, the Conference must develop tangible positions and proposals, and allow for the discussion process to happen and for the representative and participatory sides of democracy to work together. As trade unionists, we will do our best to make this happen, and to ensure citizens and workers are put first, but for this to work, the information flow needs to gain in transparency, and additional time might have to be added. (ppr)



Banking and finance key to sustainable reconstruction and recovery after COVID-19

By the EESC Diversity Europe Group

Commissioner Mairead McGuinness joined the lastest extraordinary meeting of the Diversity Europe Group to debate the role of finance and banking in Europe's recovery.

In his welcome address, Diversity Europe Group president **Séamus Boland** recommended considering the role that conventional and alternative banking systems could play in the financial recovery, especially for small socially minded businesses, the social economy sector and SMEs. The Group president saw the need for a shift to financial and banking systems that take more account of citizens' choices and preferences.

The Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union pointed out that the role played by the financial system in the recovery was crucial for a sustainable future. The pandemic and the consequences of climate change have raised awareness about the need to redirect money towards sustainability so that economies, businesses and society become more resilient to shocks.

The Commissioner said that the pandemic had brought about a tremendous acceleration in digitalisation, particularly in the financial system. "Financial stability is crucial. We are looking carefully at these innovations, which are positive, but equally we have to manage the risks that can arise from innovation and

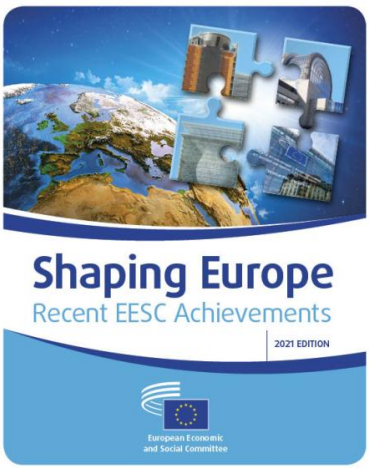
make sure that we protect citizens", she explained.

A number of members took the floor during the debate with the Commissioner. **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, vice-president of the Group, warned: "There will not be any economic or social recovery in Europe if financial and banking actors do not work together in the interest of the economy and society as a whole".

Regarding the digitalisation of finance, **Giuseppe Guerini**, spokesperson for the EESC's Social Economy Category, said it was important to strike a balance between the necessary regulation and the need to encourage innovation.

In response to the many questions from members, **Commissioner McGuinness** said amongst other things that the Commission was working hard to avoid a financial crisis as a result of the pandemic. It was important to prevent a build-up of non-performing loans on bank balance-sheets. Financing the recovery needs to take account of the different starting-points, as the impact of COVID-19 has varied. (jk)

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



New publication: Shaping Europe – Recent EESC achievements – 2021 edition

From the very beginning of the pandemic, the EESC has played an active role in shaping policies related to the ad-hoc response to COVID-19 and to overcoming the crisis. In parallel, the Committee has maintained a long-term, forward-looking approach, working to prepare economies and societies for the post-COVID-19 reality. This publication brings you specific examples of our recent actions and initiatives that have made a difference, and have had an impact on shaping Europe.

This brochure is available in six language versions (EN, FR, DE, IT, ES and PL) on the EESC's website: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/shaping-europe-recent-eesc-achievements-2021-edition.

Hard copies can be ordered from vipcese@eesc.europa.eu. (fgr)

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