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EDITORIAL



One year into the EESC's new term of office: a first opportunity to take stock

One year into the EESC's new term of office: a first opportunity to take stock

We all remember the day we launched the new term: it was 28 October 2020, at the height of the pandemic, and the plenary was to take place online. Everything was surreal; the future seemed uncertain; nobody knew when and how a vaccine would become available, but we managed to get our work under way.

The pandemic led to a global health crisis, with the loss of millions of lives, and a global economic crisis that we are striving to overcome. At this dramatic juncture, the European Union had the strength and determination to move extremely quickly to take unprecedented measures. On the health front, the procurement of medical supplies and protective equipment and the measures taken with regard to vaccines supported our national health services. From an economic and financial point of view, the EU has rolled out emergency measures and unprecedented funding, including SURE, to mitigate unemployment risks, and NextGenerationEU, the European Recovery Plan.

On top of this, the last year has been marked by an upsurge in events linked to climate change: fires in France, Italy, and Greece, flooding in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, and the melting of glaciers in Greenland. The environment is like the human body: it is sending out unambiguous signals about its state of health. Society is now tuned into these issues and more aware than before, and young people are key players in these battles, with the "Fridays for Future" movement that calls on politicians to take tangible and timely action to secure a future for the Earth. The European Commission has given new impetus to its environmental policy with the Green Deal: we are on the right track.

The last few months have been marked by the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe: this is an extraordinary opportunity for citizens to have their say on the shape of the European Union.

The EESC has been heavily engaged on each of these issues. Opinions and statements on the Health Union, on NextGenerationEU, on the Green Deal and on the European Pillar of Social Rights have been drawn up and sent to the institutions. Citizens, workers, entrepreneurs and organised civil society as a whole have a voice, and this voice must be heard.

In September, President von der Leyen invited the Italian Paralympic champion Bebe Vio to her State of the Union address: a young woman who has fought against and overcome all manner of adversity since childhood. Her words should spur us all on, especially the younger generations, in building a European Union of solidarity and diversity: "If it seems impossible, then it can be done."

Giulia Barbucci, EESC Vice-President

DIARY DATES

27-28 October 2021, Brussels

European Migration Forum – 6th meeting

31 October – 12 November 2021, Glasgow

COP26 – UN Climate Change Conference

18-19 November 2021, Lisbon

"Connecting EU" Seminar

8-9 December 2021, Brussels

EESC plenary session

2021 EESC Civil society prize awards ceremony

STRAIGHT TO THE POINT

Straight to the point!

Welcome to our new column "Straight to the point", in which we ask EESC members about important EU topics, opinions or events that have an impact on everyday life in the EU. This time we give the floor to Andrej Zorko, rapporteur of the exploratory opinion "Key components of sustainable quality work during and after recovery", requested by the Slovenian Presidency of the EU and adopted at the EESC's September plenary session.

Andrej Zorko goes straight to the point and explains why the principle of quality of work for quality of life must be upheld at all stages during and after recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Why does the EESC attach such great importance to this idea and why does it think it should be given special attention in EU policies?



The principle of quality of work for quality of life must be upheld

By Andrej Zorko (Workers' Group), rapporteur of the exploratory opinion on "Key components of sustainable quality work during and after recovery"

Quality of work is one of the fundamental components of quality of life. The principle of quality of work for quality of life must be followed at all stages, as this is a prerequisite for sustainable social development.

The EESC therefore firmly believes that it should be given special attention in EU policies, as it must prevent the risks of inequality, poverty, social exclusion, social dumping and unfair competition. In the EESC's view, economic and social recovery must go hand in hand.

The problems and challenges that exist should be addressed in the light of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. The ILO international standards of decent work should also be considered, along with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The EESC is aware of the diversity and multifaceted nature of the concept of sustainable quality work and also points out that it is made up of various components that directly or indirectly affect people's quality of life, workers' rights and workers' social security.

Ensuring fair, competitive conditions for the European economy, investing in innovation and development, preventing social dumping, encouraging job creation and promoting fair working conditions and appropriate incentives should be the key components of the European Union's and the Member States' strategies and can make a significant contribution to raising the quality of work.

In this line, effective social dialogue (both bipartite and tripartite) at EU and national level is crucial. We recommend capitalising on the traditional content of social dialogue to include other, more strategic content oriented towards sustainability and solutions. This would include, for example, anticipating the future needs of companies and workers with certain competencies and skills, joint activities for training workers, ensuring a fair transition to the digital and green economies, and regulating and developing balanced solutions for the work of platforms, as well as similar important development issues.

The EESC notes that the Recovery and Resilience Facility does not directly address the components of quality work, and therefore calls on the Commission to supplement this part of the facility. Vulnerable groups, such as precarious and young workers, who have been hit hardest by the epidemic, should not be overlooked.

In the end we can say that it is the responsibility of the Commission, the Member States and the European and national social partners to pay more attention to the issues of decent and quality work and to plan and implement measures to ensure sustainable quality work, together with all other relevant stakeholders.

ONE QUESTION TO ...



One question to…

In our "One question to..." section we ask EESC members to respond to what we think is a particularly important question of the moment.
For the October edition, we asked **Ionuţ Sibian**, vice-president of the Section for External Relations and president of the EU-Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, to comment on the future accession of Western Balkans countries.

Civil society role is bridging the gap between politics and people

EESC info: How can civil society accompany the process of negotiations and future integration of Western Balkan countries? In this context, what is the role of the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum initiated by the EESC?

Ionut Sibian: It is the strong belief of the EESC that civil society has to play an active role in the enlargement process, bridging the gap between politics and people, and helping to monitor whether fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, the independence of the media, equal treatment and the fight against corruption and preventing conflicts of interest are actually implemented in practice.

Our Committee has always supported a systematic involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the planning, programming, implementation and monitoring processes related to accession reforms. This should be a principle that not only applies to and is expected from the governments of the Western Balkans but it also needs to be practised by the EU institutions themselves.

In our EESC opinion Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, adopted in March 2021, we recommend to the European Commission that civil society should be better recognised in the context of the new methodology and be granted a greater role in the enlargement process. This would help in addressing not only political but also economic and social challenges. For that reason, building the capacities of social partners and other CSOs at national level, facilitating regional cooperation, as well as expertise exchange, should be maintained among the priorities for the EU funding.

Moreover, to keep a check on the transparency and accountability of Western Balkans political elites, we encourage the EU to commission regular "shadow" reports on the state of democracy from CSOs in the region. We also asked the Commission that the country reports within its' annual "Enlargement package" should follow a clear structure for monitoring how Western Balkans governments deal with civil society, in

line with DG NEAR's Guidelines and Strategic Directions for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region for the period 2021-2027. This would provide a basis for responding with political actions where backsliding takes place, while progress would bring more tangible benefits for the countries in the enlargement process

In this context, what is the role of the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum initiated by the EESC?

The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum is part of EESC activities in the Western Balkans. It completes the existing bilateral work of the EESC with countries negotiating their EU accession through Civil Society Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs), established according to the legal basis provided for within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements.

Organised every two years since 2006, the EESC's Civil Society Forum provides an opportunity to exchange views on the current situation of civil society in the region, its needs and its future development. It brings together CSOs from Western Balkan countries, members of the EESC, representatives of national Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions, representatives of EU institutions and of international organisations. The participants adopt recommendations addressed to national authorities and European institutions. This year's Forum in Skopje (30 September and 1 October) was held just before the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brdo, Slovenia, on 6 October, and the Final declaration of the Forum was distributed to all the stakeholders prior to the Summit. Also, the recommendations provide guidelines for the future activities of the EESC with the region.

Ionut Sibian, President for the EU-Western Balkans Follow-up Committee

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. We are pleased to present prominent individuals from the world of culture, politics and science whose activity and creativity are an invitation to others to be active and to take action. These are people who contribute to changing the shape of the reality in which we live.

For the EESC info October edition, we have invited Professor **Caroline Pauwels**, who is the rector of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She discusses the impact of the pandemic on young people and the university environment and offers three post-pandemic lessons that could affect the future of students.

Prof. Caroline Pauwels started her second term as rector of Vrije Universiteit Brussel in September 2020. She studied philosophy and communication sciences and has been a member of the communication

sciences department since 1989 and its head in recent years. She gained a doctorate in 1995 with a dissertation on the audiovisual policy of the European Union. From 2000 to 2016, Prof. Pauwels directed the SMIT research centre, which specialises in information and communication technologies and became part of iMinds (now IMEC) in 2004. Within iMinds, she was head of the Digital Society Department, which brings together research groups from the universities of Ghent, Leuven and Brussels. The University of Ghent awarded her the Francqui Chair from 2012 to 2014. She has been a member of several boards of directors, a government commissioner for broadcaster VRT and is a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. (ehp)



Caroline Pauwels: University at the time of the pandemic and one year later

At the beginning of September 2021, together with the rectors of the five other founding universities of our European network Eutopia, I welcomed to Brussels the rectors of three new universities that are joining our network. These were very special encounters for many reasons.

First and maybe foremost, because, after all these months, we were finally able to meet again in person. When, in March 2020, we had to make a head-over-heels decision to continue the university's work online, we may all have hoped it would be something very short-lived. Also, because none of us could at that moment imagine exactly how it would work: keeping a university running in online mode. But somehow we managed. In no time, teachers were trained in the use of new ways of organising their teaching online, protocols were drawn up to continue essential work in the labs, and new temporary governing bodies were created to guide the university through these extraordinary times. We managed, thanks to the dedication and unwavering perseverance of so many.

Many lessons can be drawn from the past period, but I would especially like to highlight three.

One, inequality exists. Covid has also made that clear. The chances of getting sick, of dying, are unevenly distributed in this society. Those who are poor, those who have less schooling, who are of colour or who have a migration background have been hit harder by this crisis. We have also seen this among our students. Try taking part in online education when you don't have a computer or study space or when you have to share it with siblings. Try keeping up with your courses when you don't know how to keep paying your bills, because all the student jobs have been cut. Inequality exists. Inequality is getting sharper.

Two, this generation of students is strong and resilient. Over the past year and a half, they have done a great job, sometimes in a very difficult context. I am thinking in particular of the student representatives. For the past year and a half, they have actually co-managed the university. I am so grateful to them for their fresh perspective on things, for their countless inspiring suggestions, for their sometimes harsh, but fair and always constructive criticism.

Three, although all of us are happy to once again be able to come to campus, we should give education based on blended learning – some in the classroom, some online, some off campus – a fair and, above all, a

greater chance. For too long, the basis of our pedagogical project has still been primarily based on ex cathedra teaching. We should provide more time and space for informal and interactive learning. Blended learning can be helpful in making this transition possible.
Even before Covid, my university had started this movement towards more mixed forms of learning. Through the weKONEKT.brussels project, we brought students into contact with the city, with the professional field, with practitioners. By holding classes in what might become their future workplace, by involving practitioners in education, not only did education become richer, but students got a more realistic picture of the labour market.

We are now sharing that model with our Eutopia partners. This is, in our opinion, the way forward to ensure that our students will be future proof when they graduate and will have acquired the necessary skills and competences for the challenges they will have to face later in life.

Caroline Pauwels



Herman van Rompuy: The old poet speaks gently

We are pleased to continue the publication of the series of haikus, under the common title "The old poet speaks gently", offered to us by their author, Herman van Rompuy, former president of the European Council.

Original version of haikus is in French.

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Summer slowly slips away
To the colours of autumn
The eternal charm

***

Butterflies fly
Without even knowing
In which countries they are

***

The light is still bright
The leaf hanging on the branch
Time slips away slowly



Herman van Rompuy : Le vieux poète parle doucement

Nous sommes heureux 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.

***

L'été glisse lentement
Aux couleurs de l'automne
Le charme éternel

***

Les papillons volent
Sans même savoir
Dans quels pays ils sont

***

La lumière est encore vive
Le feuille suspendue à la branche
Le temps glisse lentement

EESC NEWS



Cohesion must be at the heart of post-pandemic Europe, say Commissioner Elisa Ferreira and EESC president Christa Schweng

Cohesion policy is key to developing a new post-COVID-19 vision for the European Union, centred on prosperity, inclusion and environmental sustainability, a vision in which organised civil society is fully included. This was the message from Christa Schweng, EESC president, and echoed by Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, at the EESC September plenary session.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, cohesion policy has been instrumental in finding solutions during the emergency, and in the 2021-2027 programming period it should continue to be used to address the challenges and inequalities existing within and between Member States, regions, cities and people, with the situation worsening during the pandemic.

"Cohesion policy plays a key role in ensuring a balanced recovery that leaves no one behind. The principle of partnership with civil society organisations is part of the policy's DNA, and we would like to see this principle extended to NextGenerationEU and the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. Cohesion policy should also become less bureaucratic, more digitalised and more effective", said **Ms Schweng**.

Ms Ferreira noted that the COVID-19 crisis had made existing inequalities worse and opened up new ones, affecting in particular workers on the front line, vulnerable people such as the elderly and people with disabilities, those with less access to services, and those who had suffered more from the impacts of lockdown, such as women and young people: "our Union is as strong as its weakest link. To fight back and reduce inequalities is a *sine qua non* for a strong and thriving Union. Social fairness and inclusivity need to be at the centre of our recovery. We cannot solve social issues without solving spatial and regional inequalities. We must take account of the places where people live". (mp)



Media freedom must stay at the top of our agendas

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is joining the EU's efforts to reverse the worrying trend of declining media freedoms and the increasing curbs on journalistic independence caused by mounting pressure from various power and business structures, poor pay, media ownership concentration and a proliferation of fake news on social media and other channels.

In a debate with the head of the Brussels Office of Reporters without Borders, **Julie Majerczak**, and the General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists, **Ricardo Gutiérrez**, held during its September plenary session, the EESC expressed concern at the way journalists are increasingly becoming targets of verbal and physical attacks, with 16 murdered since 2015.

"We see trends in Europe that we cannot accept. Media freedom and diversity are the preconditions for a well-functioning democracy and therefore concern all of us. Professional journalism can never be replaced by algorithms, news aggregation and social networks," EESC president **Christa Schweng** said.

The EESC endorsed the latest European Commission initiatives, including the Recommendation on the Safety of Journalists, presented last week by Commissioner Věra Jourová. It welcomed the Commission president's State of the Union speech, in which Ursula von der Leyen announced the plans for the European Media Freedom Act.

However, in the opinion on *Securing media freedom and diversity in Europe*, adopted at the plenary session, the EESC called on the Commission to apply general conditionality rules and impose budgetary sanctions

without delay on those countries where media freedom and pluralism were seriously threatened.

The rapporteur for the opinion, **Christian Moos**, warned: "Recommendations on the protection and safety of journalists will not be enough. There is no more time to lose. Member States that stifle media freedom must be excluded from Next Generation EU. The regulation on conditionality must be applied. Hungary and Poland are actively destroying or have already destroyed media freedom. Their governments must restore democracy and the rule of law, otherwise they cannot remain members of the EU, which legally guarantees democracy and the rule of law and, as an indispensable prerequisite for both, media freedom."

Ms Majerczak and **Mr Gutiérrez** expressed their support for the EESC opinion and for EU action to secure media freedom and pluralism, but stressed the importance of ensuring that the Commission's recommendations and proposed plan did not remain a dead letter. (ll)



Civil society is key to turning words into deeds - EESC president Christa Schweng welcomes the priorities and ambitions set out in the State of the Union address

A strong emphasis on the EU's recovery, health union and digitalisation, a firm position on defending the rule of law and a focus on the future of Europe: the EESC welcomes these aspects of this year's State of the Union address, which are in tune with its priorities.

The EESC's priority continues to be the implementation of the reforms set out in the national recovery and resilience plans, taking into account the needs of employers, workers and civil society at large.

"Turning such reforms into actions will only be possible with the full involvement of organised civil society," said **Christa Schweng**, EESC president.

The swift research, availability and rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines showed that Europe is delivering. A genuine Health Union as highlighted by the Commission president, **Ursula von der Leyen** is one of the key priorities for the EESC's current term of office.

When it comes to investment in future technologies, the EESC stresses that the EU must develop its own vision and strategy for digital sovereignty, while remaining open to free trade and supporting the multilateral system.

Ms Schweng also welcomes the European Commission's firm stand on the rule of law. We must defend European values.

For the EESC, the future success of Europe's economic and social model will largely depend on our ability to partner and connect with the rest of the world, from our closer neighbours such as the Western Balkans to other geopolitical strategic partners. (at)



The renewed EU commitment to the fight against human trafficking must bring tangible results

The EESC broadly supports the EU's new 2021-2025 strategy against trafficking in human beings, but also calls attention to the need to incorporate the social dimension into the policy.

When it comes to victims' rights and the social dimension, the new EU strategy on the fight to uproot trafficking falls short. The EESC feels that the situation of victims is not addressed in a consistently humane way throughout the strategy.

As **Carlos Manuel Trindade**, EESC rapporteur, pointed out, "Human trafficking leads to huge suffering among victims: it is an attack on dignity. That is why the social dimension should be taken on board in this fight."

With both profits and victims on the rise, the EESC welcomes the Commission's position that the Anti-Trafficking Directive must be implemented in all Member States and reviewed on the basis of a thorough assessment of the limitations identified and developments in human trafficking.

Furthermore, the EESC highlights the need to improve sanctions and endorses the establishment of minimum standards at EU level that criminalise networks involved in the whole process of trafficking and exploiting human beings.

Factoring the social dimension into the implementation of the strategy

The plan completely fails to provide for the recognition and enforcement of victims' rights, which should be a core concern in affirming human dignity and human rights. Victims should be granted the right to be integrated into the host society, by means of an appropriate, fast-track integration process.

The opinion also highlights the need to create decent and adequate economic and social conditions for people in the countries of origin, the main way of curbing or preventing the recruitment of trafficking victims.

Lastly, the new strategy should recognise the significant support provided by community solidarity networks in protecting, welcoming and integrating victims and the work carried out by civil society organisations. (at)



EESC: voluntary returns may become a euphemism for expulsions

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomed the Commission's efforts to harmonise the measures regulating voluntary return of migrants and their reintegration into their country of origin, but said it doubted the feasibility of some of

the proposals put forward and expressed concern that voluntary returns could turn into expulsions of migrants from the EU.

The EESC stressed that the majority of voluntary returns did not work properly because the countries of origin were not sufficiently involved and because migrants in irregular situations were often reluctant to go back.

The EESC's standpoint was presented in the opinion on the *Voluntary return and reintegration strategy* adopted at its September plenary session, in which the Committee took a closer look at the strategy which is one of the key objectives of the New Pact for Migration and Asylum.

The EESC reiterated its previous criticism of the Pact which was almost exclusively focused on tackling irregular situations at the border or through voluntary and forced returns, while failing to offer a comprehensive approach to managing migration by promoting legal and safe mobility. The EESC sees this as a strategic weakness of the EU's migration and asylum policy.

"We have to manage irregularity before irregularity occurs. This means we have to ensure safe and effective ways of entering the EU. If we can do that, we could see a reduction in irregular arrivals," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **José Antonio Moreno Díaz**.

The current piecemeal approach contained a number of flaws.

The incentives currently given to countries of origin may actually discourage them from trying to reduce the flows of migrants, as these incentives are offered through programmes based on the existence of persons in irregular situations.

The EESC said that it was particularly concerned about the Pact's objective of increasing swift voluntary returns from the EU's external borders.

"Are these expedited returns really voluntary or are they expulsions? We are worried that 'voluntary return' may become a euphemism for expulsions or for financial compensation paid to the destination countries that receive returnees, without ever considering their wishes or - even more worryingly - their rights, " said **Mr Moreno Díaz**.

The EESC concluded that cooperation with third countries on any aspect must be based on their respect for international public law, as well as their protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. (ll)



AI in Europe: not all decisions can be reduced to ones and zeros

In two reports on draft EU legislation on AI, the EESC calls for an all-out ban on social scoring and for a complaint and redress

mechanism for people who have suffered harm from an AI system.

At its September plenary, the EESC welcomed the proposed Artificial Intelligence Act (AIA) and Coordinated Plan on AI.

The EESC feels that the new legislation really places health, safety and fundamental rights at its centre, and resonates globally by setting a series of requirements with which developers both in and outside Europe will have to comply if they want to sell their products in the EU.

There are some weaknesses in the proposals in the EESC's view, including in the area of "social scoring". The Committee flags up the danger of this practice gaining currency in Europe as it is doing in China, where the government can go so far as to deny people access to public services.

The draft AIA does include a ban on social scoring by public authorities in Europe, but the EESC would like to see it extended to private and semi-private organisations so as to rule out such uses as establishing whether an individual is eligible for a loan or a mortgage.

The EESC also points out the dangers of listing "high-risk" AI, warning that this listing approach can normalise and mainstream quite a number of AI practices that are still heavily criticised. Biometric recognition including emotion or affect recognition, where a person's facial expressions, tone of voice, posture and gestures are analysed to predict future behaviour, detect lies and even to see if someone is likely to be successful in a job, would be allowed. And so would assessing, scoring and even firing workers based on AI, or assessing students in exams.

In addition, the proposed requirements for high-risk AI cannot always mitigate the harm to health, safety and fundamental rights that these practices pose. Hence the need to introduce a complaint and redress mechanism which will give people who have suffered harm from AI systems the right to challenge decisions taken solely by an algorithm.

More generally, in the EESC's view, the AIA works on the premise that, once the requirements for medium- and high-risk AI are met, AI can largely replace human decision making.

"We at the EESC have always advocated a human-in-command approach to AI, because not all decisions can be reduced to ones and zeros," says **Cateljine Muller**, rapporteur for the EESC's opinion on the AIA. "Many have a moral component, serious legal implications and major societal impacts, for instance on law enforcement and the judiciary, social services, housing, financial services, education and labour regulations. Are we really ready to allow AI to replace human decision making even in critical processes like law enforcement and the judiciary?" (dm)



On the first EU "organic day", the EESC stresses the importance of more sustainable, fairer and more inclusive food systems

With Europe slowly getting back on track after the COVID-19 crisis, it is high time it moved from words to action and implemented the Farm to Fork strategy. The EESC strongly advocates supporting the transformation of Europe's food systems so that they become more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable. It also stresses that cooperation (rather than competition) among food chain operators is essential to foster a more resilient and inclusive food system, ensuring a fair share for all.

The European Union celebrated its first "organic day" on 23 September 2021 and the EESC has just adopted opinions on the *Action Plan for the development of EU organic production* and *Towards a Fair Food Supply Chain*.

Great opportunities are coming up for decision-makers to bring about the transformations needed. We are at a critical point for implementing a comprehensive food policy.

From 8.5% to 25% of agricultural land for organic farming in the EU: an ambitious target

As part of the European Green Deal, the Commission has set a target for organic production in the EU under the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy: at least 25% of agricultural land is to be farmed organically by 2030.

"Organic farming has a role to play in achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal. A market-oriented approach to further increase consumer demand and confidence in organic products will be the key," said **Andreas Thurner**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on organic production.

The EESC nevertheless stresses the need for sufficient financial resources to ensure that the benefits of this major conversion to organic farming are enjoyed by all EU citizens. (mr)



The sustainable finance taxonomy: a key tool for supporting green investment and preventing climate change

The EU needs efficient and urgent measures to reduce emissions and get to grips with climate change. To that end, the Sustainable Finance Package presented by the European Commission has the potential to establish a clear, coherent and comprehensive framework in which a greener economy can develop without lock-in effects.

In the opinion adopted at the September plenary session, drawn up by **Stefan Back**, the EESC fully supports the Commission's measures aimed at setting standards for the definition of "sustainable economic activities", but points out that some elements may prove a complex and costly challenge, particularly for SMEs.

The Committee says that it is important to clearly define technical criteria for the green investments that directly contribute to Europe's climate objectives and to which the practices of the business sectors concerned and the financial sector can be aligned. Setting standards that diverge from the maximum requirements of EU legislation may create confusion, and the EESC therefore recommends strengthening those requirements.

"The package of Commission measures is intended to enable investors to re-orientate investments towards more sustainable technologies and businesses. We need efficient, easily applicable, innovative and productive tools that bring about rapid and clear results. The assessment of the Sustainable Finance Taxonomy Delegated Regulation should be carried out in this spirit", stressed **Mr Back**. (mp)



The 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum makes clear the place of the Western Balkans is in the EU

The EESC's Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, which took place in Skopje on 30 September and 1 October, shone a bright spotlight on the state of play in the region's clear EU accession prospects and the active involvement of civil society in this effort.

The Forum, held by the European Economic and Social Committee in collaboration with the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council, came at a timely moment, just days ahead of the EU-Western Balkan (WB) Summit in Brdo, under the Slovenian Presidency.

The prime minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, **Zoran Zaev**, said: "Strengthening the accession process – an EU credible perspective for the WB – is the right topic at the right time because of the imposed enlargement blockade."

EESC president **Christa Schweng** affirmed the Committee's clear support for the enlargement of the EU to the countries of the region.
"I truly believe that the place of the WB is in the EU. We must also not forget that any discussion on enlargement is implicitly a discussion on the future of Europe, and civil society, both from the region and from the EU, should be fully involved in the process."

Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement **Olivér Várhelyi** commented: "The path into the EU is long and complicated and full of challenges. But those truly dedicated make it. And for me, there is no doubt – the future of the Western Balkans is the European Union."

Echoing this, **Gašper Dovžan**, state secretary at Slovenia's foreign ministry, said enlargement was a logical step and a mutually beneficial process that required ambition and resilience.

Active involvement of civil society is a must in the accession process

Biljana Spasovska, from the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), expressed her concern at the shrinking space and the decreased funding of civil society, saying basic freedoms had been challenged, especially during the pandemic.

Forum participants stressed the importance of guaranteeing freedom of association and ensuring an enabling civic space.

The guidelines for the implementation of the Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) were also discussed. However, the success of these would depend on the meaningful inclusion and active involvement of civil society in policy-making.

Public funding for CSOs needed to be reformed in all countries in the region and civil society needs to be independent and free from political influence.

The final declaration of the 8th WB CS Forum here. (at)



EESC joins the European raw materials alliance

On 1 October 2021, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) officially kicked off its participation in the European Raw Materials Alliance (ERMA). ERMA was launched on 29 September 2020 by the European Commission in order to foster resilience and strategic autonomy in the supply of critical raw materials for EU industry and society. The alliance currently comprises over 500 members from the EU and beyond.

In light of the work carried out by the EESC with opinion CCMI 177, ERMA requested its official involvement in the form of observer status participation. The EESC Bureau appointed Mr **Andrés Barceló Delgado** (ES-GR I) as the EESC observer in ERMA, taking into account his previous work on several EESC opinions related to the topic of raw materials. Mr Barceló Delgado's input will be supported by and coordinated together with Mr **Norbert Kluge** (DE-GR II) and Mr **Kestutis Kupsys** (LT-GR III).



Run together for a better Europe

This year saw the 41st Brussels 20 km race, held on 12 September. The race was dedicated to two campaigns: the first, to promote the Conference on the Future of Europe with its slogan: "The Future is in your hands", and the second, to

encourage action against cancer and raise 10 000 euros to fight cancer and support research. For this campaign, EUR 10 from every registration fee went directly to TELEVIE, a charity event organised in French-speaking Belgium and in Luxembourg by RTL-TVI since 1989 for the benefit of scientific research against cancer for children and adults.

More than 22 000 runners from more than 100 nationalities, as well as walkers, hand-bikers and wheelchair users joined together to walk or run through the streets of Brussels. More than 800 colleagues from the European institutions took part in the race wearing the "Running for Europe" team jersey.

This year's race was won by Amaury Paquet from Liège in Belgium, who finished in 59'31, the third fastest time in the history of the event. In the ladies race, Florence De Cock, from Liège, finished first clocking 1:09:50.

The EESC was represented by its vice-president, **Cillian Lohan**, who together with **Stefaan De Rynck**, head of the Representation of the European Commission in Belgium, gave the signal to start the race. The runners were greeted by **Jaume Duch**, Director General for Communication of the European Parliament and **Queen Mathilda of the Belgians**, who also participated in the race.

The next Brussels 20 km race will take place on 29 May 2022. (ehp)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



European employers question the practical aspects of the "Fit for 55" package

By Arnold Puech d'Alissac, EESC Employers Group

A few weeks after the presentation of the legislative proposals for the "Fit for 55" package – the set of measures linked to the Recovery Fund through which the European Commission proposes meeting the target of reducing CO_2 emissions by 55% by 2030 – European employers, who are currently analysing the measures announced, fully support the direction taken but nevertheless wonder about many practical points.

European industry is already at the forefront of investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy, in hydrogen and in CO_2 capture and storage. For this reason, it is essential to avoid an ideological approach at all costs. Such an approach has frequently been taken in a bipartisan manner with regard to climate and energy issues linked to the Green Deal, and risks irreversibly damaging entire production sectors, posing great risks to employment and society, and potentially undermining economic recovery.

In particular, it should be noted that, according to some estimates, the 55% target could involve investments of more than EUR 3.5 trillion by 2030, while the available public resources are under EUR 1 trillion, or less than a third of the amount needed.

It is important to understand that European industry, with its technological innovation in products and production processes, is the solution and not the obstacle to achieving the decarbonisation objectives. There is not enough funds for the green transformation of the industrial sector in national reform programmes.

As such, it is vital to take action by setting out a harmonised and flexible regulatory framework to achieve a truly integrated energy market, by ensuring a level playing field vis-à-vis countries that do not share the Commission's climate goals, in particular for emission-intensive sectors, and by implementing investment and innovation policies to make European industrial ecosystems more resilient and technologically dynamic.

Read the full article here: europa.eu/!QC7Fpd



Workers' view on the 2021 State of the Union speech

By the EESC Workers Group

The 2021 State of the Union address has some shortcomings in terms of its ambition and clarity, despite naming virtually all the key challenges facing Europe.

Structural reforms are certainly important but the recovery and reconstruction plan, put forward by the Workers Group position paper and the EESC contribution to the 2022 Commission Work Programme, should focus on fighting inequality and poverty and regaining jobs lost, with particular attention to vulnerable groups and rising in-work poverty.

The address failed to touch on developing the implementation of the Social Pillar Action Plan and bolstering protection of platform workers. The meagre reference to social justice and fairness is reflected in the letter of intent, where the proposals barely go beyond implementing the OECD agreements on taxation.

These agreements are welcome, but the European Union should be a leading force in this matter. It goes without saying that some Member States will try to resist curbing tax avoidance, but without political courage from the executive, nothing will be achieved.

The news about banning forced labour is laudable. This should be linked to due diligence and guaranteeing human rights around the globe, and additional proposals should be presented to tackle precarious work and unpaid traineeships. Climate change measures are urgent but so are the social measures that must accompany them: unless we want EU-wide *gilets jaunes*, energy poverty must be tackled decisively and funds and regulatory action must be effective and sufficient.

The road ahead is long, and we cannot rest while millions of Europeans struggle to turn the heating on, when collective bargaining systems are weakened, while some large companies avoid taxes and fossil fuels are still subsidised. We cannot rest when more than half of the world remains unvaccinated. We must use

solidarity as a guiding principle to ensure a fairer future for everyone. (pr)



Delivering on the urgency of climate change: nowhere left to hide

Statement by the Diversity Europe Group

"It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Climate change is already affecting every inhabited region across the globe with human influence contributing to many observed changes in weather and climate extremes"(Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC, August 2021).

Climate change is already upon us and there is nowhere left to hide. Regular severe floods, fires, droughts and hurricanes. This is what the world looks like at 1.1 to 1.3° Celsius warmer than when the steam engine was invented. Today, it is impossible to ignore the impact of climate change on our daily lives. Nor can we imagine its impact, even if we reach the goal of the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5° Celsius. Our planet's future is very much under threat and there is no choice but to deliver on our common promises.

Cutting emissions, even at faster rates, will not be enough. We must also invest heavily in preparing emergency plans and in adapting to the changing climate. This will entail a mental shift: investing today and reaping the benefits in the next generation. But invest we must, with increased sustainable financial resources, backed up by strong commitments from public authorities, business, civil society and citizens. The European Green Deal and the "Fit for 55" package are both necessary and urgent. Moreover, the EU should...

Statement by the Diversity Europe Group

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



The future is in your hands – what kind of Europe do you dream of?

On 18-19 November, the European Economic and Social Committee will hold its Connecting EU Seminar, previously the Civil Society Media Seminar, which every year brings together communicators from civil society organisations represented in or linked with the EESC. The event will be held at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.

Entitled "What kind of Europe do you dream of? Civil Society and the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)", the Connecting EU Seminar will broach three topics that are among the nine proposed for citizens' discussions under the Conference. They are:

- health;
- stronger economy, social justice and jobs;
- European democracy.

The EESC believes these to be the issues closest to the hearts of Europeans or at the top of their concerns. The topics will be discussed in three panels, with speakers from academic circles, researchers and media and NGO representatives.

The EESC's intention with the seminar is to show its deep commitment to the CoFoE as a key step towards regaining people's trust in and support for the EU. It hopes that the participants, both those present in Lisbon and those following via live stream, will communicate the takeaways from the seminar to members of their organisations back home. In this way, the event can help to get more Europeans involved in the debate on Europe's future, helping them to express their ideas, wishes, concerns and expectations about what kind of Europe they dream of.

Learn more about the Connecting EU 2021 seminar: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/node/93131 (II).



Channelling financial resources into green and social investments

The industry sector will face major challenges as a result of EU measures to stave off the climate crisis. How can sustainable finance be developed to help meet the goals of the European Green Deal and at the same time ensure that European industry remains competitive? An EESC webinar on 18 October will discuss this thorny issue.

Sustainable finance should support the delivery of the objectives of the European Green Deal by channelling private investment into companies and projects that support the transition to a climate-neutral, climate-resilient, resource-efficient and just economy - a challenge to be faced jointly by the financial sector, businesses, regulatory authorities and citizens.

In the webinar entitled ***Channelling financial resources into investments that comply with environmental, social and governance criteria***, panellists and external stakeholders participating via videoconference will discuss how best to achieve these synergies and develop such sustainable finance.

The webinar is the third in a series of events on a new EU industrial strategy, which the EESC has been organising to help shape EU industrial policy for the future in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. The series will end with a major conference in March 2022 where the EESC will debate its findings with the French presidency of the EU and the European Commission.

Learn more and/or register for the webinar : link
Learn more about the webinar series 'The path to our industrial future' (dm)



Geopolitics of the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal will inevitably have an impact on our external relations. A hybrid conference co-organised by the EESC and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Brussels on 6 December will look at the extent of this impact.

The aim of the European Green Deal is to decarbonise the European economy and decouple economic growth from resource use, while ensuring that no person and no place is left behind. Through the industrial transformation of its own market, Europe aims to be a model for other global players.

The EU's relations with the rest of the world will inevitably be affected by the use of green energy sources, including the introduction of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and by greener new-generation trade agreements, an upcoming revolution in the transport sector, and new employment challenges and

opportunities.

Speakers from the EU, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), IPCC (the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and various other governmental and non-governmental organisations will discuss these groundbreaking developments in EU policy-making.

The conference will wind up with closing remarks from EESC president **Christa Schweng**, **Dimitris Dimitriadis**, president of the EESC Section for External Relations, and key EESC members.

Learn more about the event and/or register: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/geopolitics-european-green-deal. (dv/dm)

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