



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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[Podcast - The Grassroots View - S2, E5: Without media freedom, there is no democracy](#)

The EU may still enjoy the status of the safest place for journalists in the world, but this could easily change as the current trend of intimidating, harassing and even killing reporters seems to be on the rise.

Our guest is investigative journalist **Matthew Caruana Galizia**, whose mother, **Daphne Caruana Galizia**, was brutally murdered in 2017 trying to expose corruption in Malta.

Julie Majerczak, head of the Brussels office of Reporters without Borders, told us that murders of journalists – with 16 killed in the EU since 2015 – were just the tip of the iceberg. They are increasingly the victims of various forms of pressure, abuse and censorship. We asked EESC member **Christian Moos** why defending media freedoms was so important for the EU.

Is there something the EU should do and should budgetary sanctions be applied to governments which stifle critical voices and press freedoms? Our guests tell it all in our latest episode "Without media freedom, there is no democracy".

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Dear readers,

Earlier in October, the European Commission adopted its 2022 work programme "Making Europe stronger together", with a focus on rebuilding a fairer and more resilient post-COVID-19 society while accelerating the green and digital transitions. I was pleased to see that many of the recommendations set out in our [EESC resolution](#) adopted at the June plenary session had been taken on board.

Our common priorities revolve around achieving climate neutrality by 2050, shaping a digital future, strengthening the unique social market economy, building a prosperous EU and making Europe stronger in the world.

With climate change being one of the biggest challenges facing the EU, the EESC is more committed than ever to the European Green Deal. Sustainable development should become a mindset and the basis for a competitive European economy, without forgetting a focus on circularity.

For effective digitalisation, we need to ensure that education and training meet the demands of the artificial intelligence era. It is crucial that all EU citizens have equal opportunities when it comes to responding to changes in the labour market and in everyday life.

As the recovery will be at the centre of Europe's transformation after COVID-19, entrepreneurship is essential for economic growth, employment and social inclusion. But an economy that works for people cannot be achieved without social and civil dialogue.

Dialogue and civil society are also crucial for a healthy democracy that respects the rule of law and fundamental rights. We currently see a need to deploy stronger mechanisms to better monitor civic space issues and defend civil society space. When talking about democracy, we cannot forget the need for actions that uphold the primacy of EU law.

And last but not least, in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe and with the Commission's work programme having been recently adopted, I can't overemphasise the importance of involving organised civil society in shaping policy. The Committee will continue working closely with all the EU institutions towards common goals meant to make our societies stronger.

United for the future of Europe.

Christa Schweng

EESC President

DIARY DATES

6 December 2021, Brussels

[Geopolitics of the European Green Deal](#)

10 December 2021, Brussels

[European Consumer Day 2021](#)

31 March -1 April 2022, Brussels

[Your Europe, Your Say! 2022](#)



STRAIGHT TO THE POINT!

In our column "Straight to the point", we ask EESC members about important EU opinions that have an impact on everyday life in the EU.

This time we give the floor to **Giuseppe Guerini**, rapporteur for the opinion on the economics of digital platforms and especially of platform

cooperatives.



GIUSEPPE GUERINI: "THE DIGITAL PLATFORM ECONOMY: A RAPIDLY? EXPANDING PHENOMENON THAT GOES BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION"

Digital platforms build a "virtual space" where interactions and exchanges take place that involve much more than simply matching supply and demand. These platforms are able to monitor and influence workers, suppliers and users in increasingly sophisticated ways. However, they also represent an extraordinary breakthrough innovation, offering new services for clients and new employment opportunities. They are able to do so through profiling systems and extensive use of data, employing artificial intelligence systems and algorithms determined by those who

run the platforms.

As this phenomenon has grown, so have the various types of employment relationships established via digital platforms: self-employment, discontinuous working relationships and individualised employment contracts. In this context, workers' cooperatives can be a useful tool for making employment relationships more stable. They also allow workers, who are the owners of digital platforms and the algorithms that make them function, to play a direct, leading role in these employment relationships.

But what is a platform cooperative?

A platform cooperative is essentially a co-owned business that is governed democratically with the involvement of participating stakeholders. It organises the production and exchange of goods and services through IT infrastructure and protocols that allow interaction to take place between different devices, both fixed and mobile.

Like any cooperative, platform cooperatives belong to and are governed by those who are most dependent on them, in this case the workers, users and other stakeholders. Of course, this is done with due regard for the appropriate contract classification of the working members, whether they work as employees or as self-employed workers.

That is why it is important for the EU's digital transition strategy to make provision for initiatives that support the establishment of cooperatives to manage digital platforms. This should also foster collective ownership of digital services, data and technological infrastructure, thereby encouraging greater economic diversification and promoting economic democracy in the digital organisation of labour and business too. As the opinion highlights, there are some limitations with regard to the legal certainty of workers and consumers interacting on the platforms. It is therefore important to recognise the purpose of social dialogue on the one hand and, on the other, the role that social economy organisations can and must take on in this context.

The EESC's opinion contributes in a timely and coherent way to the European Commission's work on regulating digital platform workers and to a broader international debate on the phenomenon of platform cooperatives, showing that the Committee really is an attentive body able to represent civil society and Europe's social partners.

ONE QUESTION TO ...



One question to...

In our "One question to..." section, we ask **Sophia Wiegand** to respond to a topic that has attracted a great deal public attention, COP26 in Glasgow.

"Did the COP26 summit in Glasgow live up to the expectations of the young generation who are actively demanding effective solutions to combat global warming?"

Sophia Wiegand was the EESC youth delegate to COP26 and is the coordinator of the Climate Emergency Working Group of the [European Students' Forum](#) (AEGEE), which aims to educate young people on the climate crisis and empower them to practice active citizenship to contribute to a green transition. She studies International Relations at TU Dresden (Technische Universität Dresden) and her thesis focuses on environmental peacebuilding. (ehp)



Sophia Wiegand: "COP26 disappointed the young, but did not take away hope"

EESC Info: Did the COP26 summit in Glasgow live up to the expectations of the younger generation who are actively demanding effective solutions to combat global warming?

Sophia Wiegand: The answer is a clear no. Young climate activists have grown used to being disappointed by the COPs over recent years, but that does not prevent us from hoping. Considering the immense attention COP26 received and the tremendous pressure from civil society all over the world, many of us were optimistic that this summit could substantially advance climate action towards the 1.5°C target.

After COP26, however, the world is still headed for global warming of +2.4°C, despite the emphasis the Glasgow Climate Pact places on the 1.5°C target. Adaptation, mitigation and loss & damage finance for the most vulnerable communities is still billions short, yet harmful fossil fuel subsidies continue to fuel exploitation of people and the planet. And while the Glasgow Pact for the very first time addresses the need to turn away from coal, it merely speaks about phasing it “down” instead of “out” and opens up serious loopholes for the ongoing use of fossil fuels. These disappointing outcomes do not match the colourful words delivered at the summit, leaving the entire COP process with a serious credibility problem.

Many young people feel angry because they are being consciously put at risk by the lack of action. Studies show that the climate crisis will expose most of today’s youth to at least one climate-related hazard, such as heat

waves, cyclones, air pollution, floods, or water scarcity, increasing the risks of injury and health damage, forced migration from home, inadequate nutrition, and unemployment. Much more ambitious and inclusive action is required to prevent impending disaster for today’s younger generation.

Some COP26 outcomes, like the newly established cooperation between the biggest emitters China and the USA and the decision to revise the inadequate national climate targets in the coming year, certainly constitute steps in the right direction. But they are far from sufficient to address the climate crisis and protect the future of our planet and its people.

GUESS WHO IS OUR GUEST..



The surprise guest

Every month in our column "The surprise guest" we introduce a public figure whose work and commitment are seen by others as a source of inspiration. We admire them for their courage, tenacity of purpose and fidelity to ideals.

These are people who contribute to changing the shape of the reality in which we live. For EESC Info's December edition, we have invited **Matthew Caruana Galizia**, an investigative journalist and director of the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, where he works on the case surrounding the killing of his mother, Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was assassinated in 2017 following her investigations into corruption in Malta. Matthew and his family have worked tirelessly to tackle impunity and to unveil the truth about Daphne's death. (ehp)



[Matthew Caruana Galizia: "I try to make sure that my mother did not die for nothing"](#)

Interview with Matthew Caruana Galizia, investigative journalist and director of the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation in Malta.

"I work at the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation in Malta, which is named after my mother, Daphne. She was a journalist for 30 years, investigating high-level corruption and social issues in Malta, and she was murdered during the course of one of her most important investigations, on 16 October 2017. I witnessed the murder. And ever since then, together with my family, we have been fighting for justice for her".

EESC info: Has the situation for journalists improved since your mother's murder?

Matthew Caruana Galizia: For journalists in general, there is a new recognition within the Commission of the importance of investigative work and of the severity of the problems we face. We are on the right track, but I don't think that the situation has improved enough for journalists doing investigative work.

Journalists are certainly becoming better at investigating organised crime, corruption and money laundering. They are becoming more effective with each new collaborative investigation.

The Pandora Papers is the latest one, an incredibly effective, well-structured investigation. The people working on that did an incredible job with very few resources, but the reason our work has not become easier is because, globally, our authorities are struggling to keep up in the fight against corruption.

We have been slow in developing new tools globally that can be used to fight organised crime and corruption. And yes, this has continued to mean that journalists who publish evidence and reports about corruption and organised crime are exposed to serious risk.

How can civil society support investigative journalists?

Very large and well-funded civil society organisations are in a position to finance investigative work and support the work of freelance journalists on some important investigations. Human rights organisations are speaking up about violations of the right to freedom of expression and about the use of legal harassment to silence journalists.

My family has received a huge amount of support from civil society organisations, and if it were not for that support, we would have not made the progress that we've made up to now in fighting for justice for my mother. But of course, those civil society organisations, in turn, depend on funding from European

institutions, European bodies, from private citizens, from membership, things like that. NGOs are vilified and given a bad name. They're targeted themselves. So we also have to protect them, too.

What more can the European Union do to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of the press?

I do believe that with the change in leadership at the European Commission, journalists and people who work in the field of human rights, defenders of the right to freedom of expression, have an ally in the Commission and we also have an ally in the European Parliament, which has just created a prize named after my mother, the Daphne Caruana Galizia prize for journalism. This shows clearly one of the EU's most important institution's support for investigative journalism, in a real, effective, material way.

The institutions, I believe, are held back by the Member States of the EU, which are, for example, failing to implement the Whistleblower Directive and failing to implement the Anti-Money Laundering Directives. There are some countries in the European Union, for example, that do not have public registers of the ownership of companies. Cyprus is one of them. And this makes it harder for journalists to do their work.

I really want to make sure my mother didn't die for nothing. That's really my number one motivator, that lessons are learned from my mother's murder, that the same thing doesn't happen again. I mean, it has happened again and again, which shows how far we have to go. Ján Kuciak was murdered, a journalist in Greece, another journalist in the Netherlands. So we do have a long way to go, but we're on the right track. We just need to keep pushing.



[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.

Arbres abattus
plus de tiges de printemps
En attendant le transport

Feuilles mortes
Plus nombreuses chaque jours dans les rues
l'automne tombe vite

La lumière est revenue
Après la grisaille de la pluie
Un ciel d'espoir



A sky of hope

[Herman van Rompuy: The old poet speaks gently](#)

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

These haikus were originally written in French.

Herman van Rompuy: The old poet speaks gently

Felled trees
no more spring stems
Waiting for transport

Dead leaves
More in the streets every day
autumn is falling fast

The light has returned
After the grey of the rain



[Future EU trade policy needs to be open, fair, inclusive and sustainable](#)

In a plenary debate on the future of EU trade policy in a changing global reality, the EESC stressed that open, fair, inclusive and sustainable trade was the only trade that would deliver a resilient recovery and bring prosperity to business and people. It also acknowledged the key role of the World Trade Organisation in this effort.

The global trade picture shows that recovery remains heterogeneous.

The EESC president, **Christa Schweng**, commented: *"International trade should be free, fair, sustainable and predictable. It's vital for our business and people. Sustainable trade is the only trade that will deliver a resilient and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic"*.

At its October plenary session, the EESC hosted Ambassador **Jean-Marie Paugam**, Deputy Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), who was positive that the international trading system had proven its resilience in the face of the pandemic. *"At the start, we witnessed a proliferation of restrictive measures to trade, but quite quickly states chose the path of cooperation and facilitation"*.

In the [own-initiative opinion Next Generation Trade and Sustainable Development-Reviewing the 15-point action plan](#), linked with the debate, the EESC aims to ensure that this time the message for a "values-based trade agenda" is clearly set out as an integral part of the EU Trade strategy.

The rapporteur of the opinion, **Tanja Buzek**, specifically underlined that labour and environmental chapters were not living up fully to their legally binding commitments. *"We propose an ambitious review, featuring a revamped sanctionable enforcement approach with stronger civil society monitoring, using innovative instruments and enhancing the leverage for trade and sustainable development chapters (TSD)"*.

Mr Paugam set as a priority the restoration of confidence in the system, which had been undermined by many stakeholders and states for a long time. *"What we must rebuild is first of all the minimum level of trust, as without it, no negotiation can take place"*, adding emphatically that the most precious asset at the WTO was "non aes sed fides", not money but trust.

Based on a recently published article in [Borderlex](#) by **David Henig** and his three possible scenarios for the WTO, "revival, disintegration or regression", **Mr Paugam** chose "reconstruction". Therefore, the EU and European Civil Society should be actively involved because, as **Ms Buzek** put it, *"There is no sustainability without civil society"*.

Concluding the event, **Ms Schweng** said: *"The active involvement and buy-in from organised civil society, in all its components, is a core element of a sustainable trading system that delivers for people"*. (at)



Violations of Schengen area freedoms and rights need to be addressed

The European Economic and Social Committee has welcomed the new EU strategy for the future of the Schengen area put forward by the European Commission. However, it has warned that the EU and Member States are obliged to uphold the Charter of Fundamental Rights with regard to the management of EU and national borders, police and judicial cooperation and migration and asylum policies.

Its call for action in the [opinion](#) on the new strategy, adopted at its October plenary session, comes after worrisome reports of fundamental rights violations at the EU's external borders, which the EESC finds extremely concerning.

"We are asking the European Commission and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency to monitor and fix these worrying issues and to follow up on reports of fundamental rights violations without delay," said

the rapporteur for the opinion, **Ionuț Sibian**.

The EESC noted that in recent years, the Schengen area has faced some tough challenges to its consistent application. The 2015 refugee crisis exposed shortcomings in the EU's approach to managing external borders and migration, while the COVID-19 pandemic prompted temporary reinstatements of internal borders. Disruptions to the Schengen area have harmed businesses, workers, border communities and cross-border cooperation.

The EESC stressed that the Commission should regularly and carefully monitor and assess the need for and extent of these reinstatements, taking action when needed.

In the opinion, the Committee also urged the Council to take swift action to end the continued exclusion of Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania from the full application of the Schengen Treaty.

"People in Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia still do not fully enjoy their rights as EU citizens as they are excluded from the Schengen area. The EESC supports their inclusion. These countries are keen to take part, and Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania already control their external borders in line with the Schengen Borders Code," said **Mr Sibian**.

The EESC strongly supports updating the Schengen Borders Code to include the lessons learned from the pandemic. It also calls for the strengthening of the Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights and the involvement of organised civil society via the EESC. (II)



[Industrial policy: time for the EU to do more than fix market failures](#)

How to best ensure the strategic autonomy of Europe's industry was the focus of a debate on industrial policy at the EESC October plenary.

The EESC plenary on 21 October hosted a debate with **Padmeshree Gehl Sampath**, Berkman Klein Fellow at Harvard University, on how industrial strategy can support the twin transition to a green and digital economy, contribute to Europe's recovery and increase its strategic

autonomy and resilience.

A leading expert on technology, development and the global political economy, **Padmeshree Gehl Sampath** made the case for a new type of public intervention that does not just focus on fixing market failures, but directs technological change in socially productive directions.

"It is time to rethink industrial policy bold and out of the box", she said. "We should not repeat what did not work in the past."

The first step in designing this new industrial policy should be to recognise that the decline in entrepreneurship, innovation and competitiveness witnessed in advanced economies is constantly reinforced by new technological paradigms and trends across a multitude of sectors and processes. Uncertainty in the post-COVID world is not just a result of the pandemic. It also ricochets the multiple effects of data-driven networks, the unfair spread of digitalisation dividends over the last 15 years, the pressure of climate change and the energy transition on countries, and the slowdown - even breakdown at times - of global trade and supply chains that have been carefully built since the onset of globalisation in the 1980s.

The second step would be to build a new strategy based on three bold propositions:

- 1) Acknowledging that there is a greater interconnectedness between the three mega trends of the future - health care/pandemic preparedness, energy transition/climate action and the data economy - and leveraging it. We do not need an industrial policy that prioritises these megatrends simultaneously on different tracks, but one that considers these transformations in a circular model of change.
- 2) Favouring dynamism in the technology sector by focusing on market retention and market performance, which is a more crucial issue than market entry in all these key sectors, especially in the pharmaceuticals and vaccine sector, where there are currently strong oligopolistic trends.
- 3) Adopting a real sectoral approach to industrial policy, moving beyond common goalposts such as competition policy because, although all these sectors are high-tech, R&D intensive and depend on innovation and rewards, they have completely different characteristics.

For instance, asked **Ms. Gehl Sampath**, if we really want to promote a healthcare market in Europe based on existing strengths, can the EU support a public purpose programme for a health industry ecosystem of the kind Operation Warp Speed created in the US in the immediate aftermath of COVID? Can Europe

facilitate the scale-up of the strengths of its existing biotech firms in similar kinds of public investment programmes that facilitate product development?

Industrial strategy has been a major focus of the EESC's work in recent times. A series of webinars is underway to look at the stress points for today's industry. Entitled [The path to our industrial future](#), the series will wind up in a major conference in March 2022 where the EESC will debate its findings with the French presidency of the EU and the European Commission. (dm)



Reversing the negative trends in the rule of law across the EU through civil society

The conference on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law held by the European Economic and Social Committee brought into light serious violations and negative trends in the four areas covered by the European Rule of Law Mechanism (justice, corruption, media, and checks and balances). The EESC stressed that civil society is a dynamic actor in defending this fundamental principle of the EU.

The president of the EESC's FRRL Group, **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, underlined the role of civil society: *"We do not turn to the representatives of civil society for the 'sake of the principle', we listen to civil society because its contribution is essential to these crucial issues"*.

Giulia Barbucci, EESC Vice-President, stated that *"EU legal and political responses cannot stand alone. We must also better engage civil society actors as they are the bridge between the expectations of the general population and institutions"*.

However, the current health crisis and measures taken by authorities have amplified the challenges already existing in this field. The Commission's July 2021 Rule of Law Report has highlighted these negative trends, but also some positive developments in certain Member States.

Gašper Dovžan, State Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Slovenia, added that *"respect for the rule of law should never be subjected to a dilemma or become a victim of any crisis."*

Nevertheless, *"there is still a lot to be done and a long way to go"* as **Matthew Caruana Galizia** said. His mother, Daphne Caruana Galizia, a Maltese journalist, was murdered while investigating corruption, money laundering and organised crime. *"My mother is unfortunately a good example of how failings in the rule of law and widespread corruption are not victimless crimes."*

There was agreement among the participants that the rule of law was vital for the functioning of the EU as a whole, including its credibility, resilience and mutual trust.

As **Debbie Kohner** from the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions summed up, all four pillars covered by the European Rule of Law Mechanism – justice system, media freedom and pluralism, anti-corruption frameworks, and other checks and balances – are intertwined.

Nicole Romain from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency also stressed that all institutional actors should make better efforts to communicate fundamental rights and the rule of law to the general population.

Eszter Nagy from the European Federalists insisted that it was high time for the EU to make full use of all its tools, starting with rule of law budget conditionality. (at)



[EU economic recovery – Civil society's role needs more clarity](#)

The implementation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) in most EU Member States needs clarified governance systems. The distribution of responsibilities between central, regional and local levels is still unclear. The EESC is sounding the alarm and, in its opinion on the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021, adopted at its October plenary session and drawn up by Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, stresses that the mechanisms for involving civil society organisations and social partners in the implementation, monitoring and adjustment phases of the NRRPs need more clarity.

The EESC had already flagged up this issue in its February resolution, but the situation remains unchanged despite the European Commission's efforts. The EESC therefore strongly calls for more scrutiny of these crucial aspects of the EU's recovery.

"We draw attention to the need to measure progress in implementing the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. We need good monitoring indicators, as they are essential for setting the course of the EU's future development and recovery. Member States have to respond properly to this challenge: we need courage to make citizens aware of the huge difficulties ahead," said **Mr Lobo Xavier**, during the debate.

In the opinion on the Euro area economic policy 2021 drafted by **Kristi Söber**, the EESC also points out that the pandemic is not over and the economic repercussions will be felt for several years. A specific and new emergency economic policy mix is therefore needed. The EU and euro area economies are once again growing quickly. At the same time, however, the EU is going through the most challenging period in the economic history of European integration. At this critical juncture, only government expenditure can help alleviate the situation.

The EESC appreciates the swift reaction at EU and national level to counter the pandemic and welcomes the fact that joint efforts have become a substantial part of the recovery strategy. Speaking at the plenary, **Ms Söber** said: "Especially in the first half of 2020, the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives helped alleviate the very difficult economic circumstances, mainly by stabilising markets, jobs and personal incomes. This first step was followed by NextGenerationEU (NGEU), the robust and highly innovative fiscal contribution. Both initiatives were a quick and flexible response to the pandemic." (mp)



[5G – EESC urges Commission to further assess impact on human health and environment](#)

European Commission should move forward in the process of assessing the multi-sectoral impact of new 5G and 6G technologies. Tools and measures are needed to address risks and vulnerabilities. In the opinion drafted by Dumitru Fornea and adopted by the assembly in the October plenary session, the EESC takes a firm stand, and notes that social, health and environmental issues need to be examined, involving citizens and all relevant actors, in spite of the fact that the debate on the deployment of 5G networks has turned into a controversial, political discussion.

Speaking on the sidelines of the plenary, **Mr Fornea** said: "Rapid digitisation and development of electronic communications has a strong impact on the economy and society at large. Through the responsible use of these technologies, humanity has a historic chance to build a better society. Nevertheless, without due diligence and democratic control, our communities might face serious challenges in the administration of these technological systems in the future."

The pandemic has shown that electronic communications infrastructure plays an important role in society and can greatly improve citizens' quality of life, with a direct impact on fighting poverty. However, potential danger needs to be continuously assessed. For this reason, the EESC recommends allocating European and national funds to more in-depth, multidisciplinary research and impact studies focused on both humans and the environment, and to disseminating these results in order to educate the public and decision-makers. (mp)



EESC says Commission's green aviation initiative has room for improvement

The European Commission's new initiative to speed up the growth of a market for sustainable aviation fuels (SAF) is a step in the right direction, but some modifications are needed to ensure that it can be implemented effectively, without creating distortions. This is the key message of the opinion on the RefuelEU Aviation proposal, drafted by Thomas Kropp and adopted at the October plenary.

"It is indeed true that sustainable aviation fuels – if produced in sufficient quantities and available to all airlines – would significantly reduce the sector's CO₂ emissions. However, it is not clear whether the approach pursued by the Commission would prevent distortions to competition," said **Mr Kropp**.

Aviation is an international service sector and covers two distinct markets with different market dynamics: the EEA Single European Market on the one hand and, on the other, the internationally regulated market. The Commission's draft proposal should clearly reflect this difference and aim to maintain a level playing field within the EEA, while proactively and globally promoting applicable standards for sustainability.

On the issue of CO₂ emissions, **Mr Kropp** has drawn up an opinion on the Notification on the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA), which was also adopted at the October plenary. In the document, the EESC endorses the Commission's proposal to amend Directive 2003/87/EC with respect to the notification of offsetting in 2021, supporting its urgent adoption in order to achieve legal certainty. (mp)



It is key to rethink priorities and put food security and sustainability at the top of the EU agenda

Recent events caused by COVID-19, extreme weather due to climate disruption, cyber-attacks and Brexit demonstrate the need to rethink priorities and improve the resilience and sustainability of EU food systems by reinforcing its autonomy. Food security is not a given for many EU citizens.

In the EESC's view, it is critical to develop a toolbox that includes risk management measures to help food supply chains deal with extreme situations, allowing authorities, farmers and industry to take immediate action.

The EESC, in its own-initiative opinion on [Strategic Autonomy and Food Security and Sustainability](#), proposes a definition of open strategic autonomy applied to food systems based on food production, workforce and fair trade, with the overarching aim of ensuring food security and sustainability for all EU citizens through a fair, healthy, sustainable and resilient food supply chain.

"Farms and fertile agricultural land and water are strategic assets and must be protected across the EU: they constitute the backbone of our open strategic food autonomy", stressed the EESC rapporteur for this opinion, **Klaas Johan Osinga**. (mr)



Sustainable and balanced rural and urban development is the key to EU citizens' well-being

EESC is calling on policy-makers to implement a comprehensive and holistic strategy for balanced, cohesive, equitable and sustainable rural and urban development. This will involve harnessing the role of local communities, boosting traditional industries and creating new economic activities and job opportunities in rural areas, while fostering synergies with urban areas.

The EESC opinion [Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development](#) makes several recommendations, based on multi-stakeholder involvement and a "bottom-up" approach, which are key ingredients for ensuring sustainability and local ownership of rural policies.

"It is essential to move towards an integrated approach to action and funding in the various policies that have an impact on rural areas. It is necessary to ensure that rural areas are not only sustainable but also attractive places to live. The quality of life in the rural world will be measured by the increase in the number of young people and new initiatives that provide quality, well-paid jobs", pointed out rapporteur **Josep Puxeu Rocamora**. (mr)



EU fiscal rules – EESC calls for reforms

The EU fiscal framework needs to be revised. This must be done not only to stabilise the economy in the medium term, but also to finance the socio-ecological transformation of our economy and guarantee full employment, high-quality jobs and just transitions. The opinion drafted by Dominika Biegón and adopted by the assembly at the October plenary session is clear: the European Commission must press on with revising the EU economic governance framework.

Speaking during the debate, **Ms Biegón** said: "*The EESC advocates pragmatic solutions for the future of the EU fiscal framework: our opinion shows how ideological divides in the debate on sovereign debts can be overcome. EU fiscal rules can be significantly improved without changing the EU Treaties. We can end the chronic lack of public investment and give Member States more leeway to counter economic downturns*

adequately in the future without endangering fiscal sustainability. The EU institutions should lose no time in proposing reforms to pave the way for sustainable recovery and a just transition."

Civil society organisations must also be more involved in the European Semester at both national and EU level. The partnership principle, which has long been a tradition in the governance of the European Structural and Investments Funds, should serve as a blueprint for effectively involving civil society. (mp)



Sustainable advertising has the power to drive Europe's green transition

In an own-initiative [opinion](#) adopted at the October plenary, the EESC set out measures for advertising to adapt to the challenges of climate change and the post-pandemic recovery while continuing to play its important role in Europe's economy and culture.

The European Economic and Social Committee recommends a framework for a modern advertising industry that maintains a fundamental role in economic growth, job creation and support for Europe's culture while becoming a trustworthy lever for responsible consumption.

According to various studies, every euro spent on advertising generates a 5 to 7 times greater boost to Europe's economy. New products and services are spread, competition expands and public access to media, arts and sport is funded. But at the same time, the industry is often criticised for promoting overconsumption and for negative impacts on society and the environment.

"We are trying to explore the way this sector should evolve so that it remains efficient but at the same time ensures that its development is compatible with sustainable development," explains **Thierry Libaert**, rapporteur of the opinion.

First, the EESC calls on businesses and agencies to debate how to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 and to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Sustainability should be incorporated into every promotional campaign. In practical terms, advertising operators could be encouraged to reduce the energy consumption of digital billboards or make them more recyclable. To limit the environmental impacts of printed publicity, businesses could shift to PEFC- and FSC-labelled paper from sustainably managed forests and to low-toxicity inks complying with EU REACH and GreenGuard standards.

Advertising practices can also "nudge" consumers into reducing their collective environmental footprint. For example, advertisements could encourage car sharing by showing fewer drivers alone in their cars. Good practice should be reinforced by a stronger focus on environmental issues in university courses for communication professions.

Another overdue discussion is on unrealistic representations, such as harmful single-use products being presented as "sustainable". In fact, a 2020 study by national consumer authorities and the European Commission found that 42% of "green" product claims on company websites were untrue or exaggerated.

A wider consensus among the advertising community to provide factual, accurate information would empower more consumers to identify products with genuinely reduced environmental impacts, argues the EESC. Here the European Commission has a role in working towards EU-wide regulation that supports the advertising industry in its fight against disinformation.

The approach should also provide incentives for advertisers who hold themselves accountable to these standards. Support would reduce the risk of advertisers migrating to the foreign tech companies that control much of digital advertising systems and strengthen an industry that remains central to Europe's transition to more sustainable consumption. (dm)



[A sustainable industrial strategy for the EU must be inclusive and consider social impacts to succeed](#)

A post-pandemic industrial strategy to ensure a strong recovery must include civil society, stresses the EESC in a recent report on the draft new EU industrial strategy. It must focus on sustainability and wellbeing, measure social impacts and promote an efficient, accessible healthcare system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in Europe's economic landscape, notably regional inequalities, skills gaps and risks to the single market and supplies of strategic goods. In the light of these lessons, the

European Commission has updated its blueprint for a greener, more digital and competitive industrial landscape, the New Industrial Strategy for Europe.

The EESC has drawn up a [report](#) on the updates and a supplementary [opinion](#) highlighting the conditions for an inclusive and innovative healthcare ecosystem that can underpin industry in the EU.

In the report, the EESC calls for all groups involved in Europe's economy to shape its future, from trade unions, industry and SMEs to other civil society organisations and public authorities. The current strategy focuses on business, but it is imperative to include the insights of social partners in designing the goals, targets and indicators needed for successful change, the EESC argues. It adds that competitiveness cannot be the only indicator of a viable long-term strategy. A broader set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is needed than in the proposed Strategy. Competitiveness and investment are not enough, the EESC believes. KPIs must also promote social wellbeing and sustainable growth if Europe's industries are to be truly sustainable.

Important areas to measure are the impacts of working and production conditions on both society and the environment, as well as the quality of jobs.

Another set of indicators should assess the shift to a "no-waste" circular economy. Finally, factors that cut across all industries, like R&D investment, should also be monitored to ensure that companies and jobs have long lifespans.

Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs) are EU-wide projects that support the development of innovations crucial to the green and digital transitions. The EESC argues that first, the know-how of

workers' organisations is needed to implement these projects well. Second, IPCEIs must be assessed for the value and jobs they create and for the skills workers and businesses need for the modernised industries.

Standards are another important instrument to re-establish European leadership in industrial production. The Committee insists that the standards developed by European companies should not just be spread by companies themselves: the Commission should be behind them and help disseminate them too.

The supplementary opinion looks at how the strategy could improve access to fairer and better coordinated healthcare in Europe.

The EESC recommends a focus on governance, diversification of supply and digital healthcare, which are all connected. Better-run businesses would allow the single market to operate more smoothly, fostering new businesses. In turn, an increased number of producers would make access to healthcare goods and services more reliable, as would incentives to bring manufacturing of essential materials and products back to Europe.

Measures to enable digital healthcare systems that work between organisations and across borders would further strengthen the single market for the industry and improve care. For the same reasons, the EESC calls for action to boost synergies between public and private sectors, large companies and SMEs and investments in R&D and training of all workers connected to healthcare. (dm)



[EESC calls for new EU policies to support the glass industry](#)

Adding to the dialogue on the transition towards a climate-neutral society, the European Economic and Social Committee has called for more action to be taken to protect the European glass industry.

The EESC is asking EU policymakers to put the glass sector at the heart of current policy priorities such as the "Fit for 55" package, the Circular Economy Package, the Digital Agenda, the strategic value chains agenda and the EU's international trade policy and associated instruments.

The EESC has welcomed the EU policies that support the glass industry in order to enable the transition towards a climate-neutral society. It sees the EU's Renovation Wave as a tremendous source of business opportunities for glass, triggering investments while contributing enormously to the reduction of CO₂ emissions from buildings. However, the EESC has strongly recommended that an energy transition also take place within the glass sector, which should receive financial support for both capital and operational expenditure and should not be exposed to unfair competition from outside the EU market.

In its own-initiative [opinion](#) on the subject, adopted at its October plenary session, the EESC calls for multiple parallel actions to deliver a greener, energy-efficient glass industry, while enhancing competitiveness and maintaining quality jobs.

"Glass is everywhere, from mobility to construction, from defence to smartphones. To fully tap the potential of the new glass market while living up to the challenges of the green and digital transitions, the EU needs an industrial strategy for glass", said the opinion rapporteur, **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu**.

The EESC calls on the Commission and the Parliament to develop new EU policies regarding climate goals and strategic value chains in order to restart the production of photovoltaic cells in Europe and safeguard the production of other strategic glass products and the related value chains.

The EESC noted that the EU glass industry is at a crossroads. On the one hand, glass has to cope with the structural transformations accompanying the digital and green transitions. Production will have to become carbon neutral and circular in three decades, while processes will be even more automated and digital in the coming years.

On the other hand, glass will be at the forefront of those transitions and there will be new business opportunities for many glass products in the coming years.

"The EU should classify glass as a permanent material and should recognise its benefits in contributing to sustainable packaging systems and circular economy principles. There is great potential to create new jobs in the glass recycling sector, and to attract new talented workers," said **Gerald Kreuzer**, co-rapporteur for the opinion.

The EESC therefore urges the EU to recognise that glass is vital for the production of green energy. (ks)



[Blended learning: equal access, full-length education and social skills must not suffer](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee has expressed some reservations about the Commission's recent proposal on introducing blended learning - traditional teacher-led learning combined with online or other independent work - in primary and secondary education, questioning its timeliness given how greatly the COVID-19 pandemic has affected education systems in Europe and elsewhere.

In the [opinion](#) on blended learning adopted at its October plenary session, the EESC also raised concerns about the suitability of this mode of learning for primary and early secondary school students, arguing that it should first be introduced in higher grades, as younger children, especially those in the early primary years, are generally not mature enough to learn independently.

"We doubt that this is the right time to introduce or push to have blended learning in schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on education systems and children, especially young children who had only just started their schooling experience. Blended learning includes learning independently and that requires certain skills," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Tatjana Babrauskienė**.

The EESC said it acknowledged that blended learning can improve access to education, training and digital skills, as seen during the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the pandemic also showed that some students lack the resources – practical or personal – to learn in this way, which in the worst cases might lead them to drop out of school. In addition, it showed that education involving close contact with peers is essential for children's socialisation and mental health.

"We cannot underestimate the value of the social role of education. It is not just about science, physics or maths: it is about children going to school together, mixing, meeting their peers. It's a matter of physical education and mental health," said the co-rapporteur, **Michael McLoughlin**.

The EESC has made 21 recommendations on how to ensure that blended learning can have a positive role in education. One major point is that it should be implemented and funded to enhance education and training for all students, with particular focus on those from lower-income backgrounds, with disabilities and in rural areas.

During the COVID-19 crisis, it became apparent that blended learning demands considerable time and creativity from already overstretched teachers who are central to the successful design and supervision of independent learning.

There are already not enough teachers in Europe, partly due to pay and difficult working conditions. It is therefore important to monitor blended-learning's impacts on conditions and workloads to avoid burnouts. To mitigate pressure, the EESC calls on national authorities to support teachers as they train for this new method of learning. (II)



High-quality long-term care is set to rise

The excessive mortality rates during this pandemic crisis have revealed structural and systemic problems in the nursing home care model. In addition, the rise in life expectancy and the consequent increase in the number of older persons in the years to come point to the need to reform the care model.

How to guarantee improved accessibility, affordability and quality of care, as well as an adequate number of care workers with improved working conditions, are among the key challenges identified during the EESC hearing "[Towards a new care model for the elderly: learning from the COVID-19 pandemic](#)". Input from this hearing will feed into an own-initiative opinion the Committee is preparing on the topic.

The rapporteur of the opinion, **Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna**, said: "*this opinion is not meant to be a comprehensive approach to ageing, but to focus on the issue of care for older people as they have been the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic*".

During the hearing, healthcare models from Member States were presented, showcasing the different approaches and difficulties due to the pandemic.

According to the 2021 long-term care report prepared by the Commission and the Social Protection Committee, population ageing is expected to lead to a clear increase in demand for long-term care. The number of people aged 65 or over is projected to rise by 41%, to 130.1 million over the next 30 years.

Maciej Kucharczyk, secretary-general of the AGE Platform Europe, said: "*developing good care systems is an opportunity and services are the means to support people's autonomy, independence and quality of life*".

Tuscany Bell, from the European Public Service Union (EPSU), said: "*in order to provide an adequate service for people in need of care, we need appropriate working conditions and a sufficient level of qualified personnel. Actually, an insufficient number of care workers care for too many people*".

As active ageing has a crosscutting nature and touches upon economic and social policies, coordination between social and health services is needed, making LTC more accessible, allowing older people to enjoy a life of dignity. (at)



[Be connected and let's stay in touch!](#)

The Connecting EU 2021 seminar in Lisbon is over. For the fourteenth time, we met with communications experts from organised civil society and press officers to talk about the Europe we dream of. Now it is time to make the dream of a strong, safe, secure, fair, inclusive, hopeful Europe a reality.

We would like to thank all our guests, speakers, moderators, journalists, EESC members, colleagues and friends for this busy, creative time in enchanting Lisbon. We can all be proud of our joint success. Let us stay in touch, and stay connected.

EESC Press Unit team

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS

Boosting the use of Artificial Intelligence in Europe's micro, small and medium-sized enterprises

By the EESC Employers' Group

The current diversity and potential of AI applications are nearly unlimited, and many businesses and citizens unknowingly use AI-driven solutions at present. As these innovative technologies become increasingly mainstream, MSMEs need to adopt AI to maintain their position vis-à-vis existing and emerging competitors. Nevertheless, several obstacles lead to an adoption gap between markets and/or between large corporations and MSMEs. A recent study shed light on the opportunities and challenges of AI uptake for Europe's MSMEs.

AI poses a series of societal and economic threats to European MSMEs. The main challenges are insufficient awareness of AI benefits amongst company management and lack of skills amongst existing (technical) staff, in addition to lacking or inaccessible data. Also, external market conditions, such as legal frameworks that are too restrictive or too broad, hamper the successful adoption of AI technologies by MSMEs.

In order to overcome these challenges and boost the uptake of AI in MSMEs, the study presents a toolbox for policy makers, which includes the following measures:

- Educate on AI & build the necessary skills in the MSME workforce to remain competitive
- Enhance centralised access to open data to train and develop AI solutions whilst protecting data ownership and control
- Expand financial instruments for MSMEs to support AI implementation in their digitalisation effort
- Ensure a transparent single market for AI solutions to reduce risks and increase transferability for MSMEs

Find the full study here: <https://europa.eu/!gy8h4C>

The study "Boosting the use of Artificial Intelligence in Europe's micro, small and medium-sized enterprises" was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the EESC Employers' Group. The authors of the study are SpaceTec Partners and UnternehmerTUM. (dv/kr)





[Ensure living wages to help close the gender pay gap](#)

By the EESC Workers' Group

10 November was Equal Pay Day 2021, an opportunity to raise awareness about the gender pay gap which averages over 14% across Europe and climbs much higher in some countries. [The trend is improving in some cases, while in others the current rate of improvement will deliver satisfactory results in a few thousand years...](#)

Underpinning this difference is the issue of insecure employment, which generally affects women more than men (women hold [58% of all minimum wage jobs in Europe](#)). Low wages affect all workers, but hit the most vulnerable hardest. One key way to close this gap is to raise minimum wages in Europe, ensuring that everyone earns a living wage.

As the [ETUC shows](#), increasing minimum wages to 60% of median wages and 50% of average wages would cut the gender pay gap by 25% in Romania, 19% in Greece, 12% in Poland, 11% in Slovakia, and 10% in Spain and Luxembourg. This is yet another reason why strengthening the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages is fundamental.

[As the EESC pointed out in March this year](#), ensuring minimum wages are decent and strengthening collective bargaining is imperative to make society stable and innovative and promote wellbeing. However, living wages are also important for lifting people out of poverty and protecting them from it, and for improving the working and living conditions of vulnerable people, which sadly still includes women. The gap goes beyond wages to include pensions: the [gap for retired people stands at 30%](#), as a result of the considerable differences in social security contributions over the working life of each group. In some cases, like Malta, this pension gap extends to more than 42%.

Civil society and the social partners, together with the European institutions and national governments, need to keep pushing to close this gap. It is an essential part of a broader campaign to secure social fairness and justice and build a better future for Europe. (prp)



Civil Society Organisations call for an EU Civil Society Strategy

By the EESC Diversity Europe Group

At a [conference](#) on 'Civil Society Organisations: Key Actors for the Future of Europe' on 5 November 2021, organised by the [EESC's Diversity Europe Group](#) (in partnership with [Civil Society Europe](#) and with the support of the EESC's Liaison Group and Associational Life Category), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and their umbrella organisations reiterated their call for an EU Civil Society Strategy and a European Statute for Associations. Appropriate follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and a regular, structured dialogue with CSOs were

considered key aspects in rebuilding citizens' trust in politics and strengthening European democracy.

Participating organisations and individuals showed determination in strengthening their cooperation in order to prevent a further shrinking and shifting of the civic space and to make the case for effective civil dialogue. Against a backdrop of increasing political and economic challenges for CSOs, funding - especially for small organisations, effective legal protection, capacity-building and recourse to existing EU complaints procedures will be crucial. Participants called on the European Institutions for support.

The conference saw the participation of high-level speakers and CSO representatives, as well as a presentation of the first results of an EESC study on 'The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space', requested by the Diversity Europe Group. The study will be published in the first quarter of 2022.

The conclusions and recommendations of this conference are available on the website of the Diversity Europe Group. They will be part of the Group's contribution to the CoFoE.

Read the whole [press release](#) on the conference. (jk)

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



"The Truth about Lies" waits to be unveiled

The 13th edition of Your Europe, Your Say! has been launched.

The EESC's annual youth event will take place remotely on 31 March-1 April 2022. Selected schools from each of the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) and the five candidate countries for EU accession will discuss the topic "The Truth about Lies:

Youth challenging Disinformation". Registrations are now closed and the draw for the selection of the participating schools will take place on 9 December.

Visits to schools by the EESC members will follow in January-February 2022. Please spread the news and stay tuned! (ck)



The EESC partners the Europalia Arts Festival and "welcomes on board" Boris Charmatz

To mark the 2021 European Year of Rail, the EESC organised the screening of a short film by the Europalia Arts Festival.

The short film is an excerpt from the dance performance "La Ronde" by the French choreographer **Boris Charmatz**.

The event is being held in collaboration with the Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN) of the EESC, during their event for the European Year of Rail, on 15 November.

You can watch the film [here](#). (ck)

Editors

Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (editor-in-chief)
Daniela Marangoni (dm)

Contributors to this issue

Amalia Tsoumani (at)
Chrysanthi Kokkini (ck)
Daniela Marangoni (dm)
Daniela Vincenti (dv)

Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (ehp)
Jasmin Kloetzing (jk)
Katharina Radler (kr)
Katerina Serifi (ks)
Laura Lui (ll)
Marco Pezzani (mp)
Pablo Ribera Paya (prp)

Coordination

Agata Berdys (ab)
Katerina Serifi (ks)

Technical support
Bernhard Knoblach (bk)

Address

European Economic and Social Committee
Jacques Delors Building,
99 Rue Belliard,
B-1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel. (+32 2) 546.94.76
Email: eescinfo@eesc.europa.eu

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