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TGV2/E7: European Year of Youth 2022: climate action is where youth empowerment should begin

As the European Year of Youth 2022 begins, we ask three leaders what they want most from this year. For all of them, a seat for young people at the table where adults take decisions that will make or break the climate would be the real measure of success. **Adélaïde Charlier**, one of the leaders of the School Strike for Climate movement, has no doubt: the European Year of Youth must not fail in this, while EESC Vice-President **Cillian Lohan** and European Commissioner for the Environment **Virginijus Sinkevičius** pay tribute to European youth for their eye-opening protests which have shot this burning issue to the top of the EU agenda. (dm)

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FINDING THE ENERGY TOGETHER TO REACH FOR OPTIMISM AND HOPE



Editorial

Firstly, I would like to express my sadness at the unexpected passing of the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli. In May 2020 President Sassoli reflected that the pandemic had shown us that we have a "great resource" within the EU – "that great resource is its civil society". He will be sadly missed.

It is now two years since we first heard of Covid-19. Following those early reports of a virus that had the potential to become a global pandemic, I am sure we did not expect to still be preoccupied by it in 2022.

We welcome the New Year and once again we try to find the energy to reach for optimism and hope.

The motto of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU seems apt: recovery, strength, a sense of belonging. Outlining the three axes of the Presidency, President Macron presented his thoughts on a more sovereign Europe, a European model of growth and a Humanist Europe.

We may look forward to moving beyond pandemic issues, but the challenges awaiting us all are significant and will have to be confronted whichever direction Covid takes next.

There will be a new focus on European defence as tensions around the world, near and far, bring these issues into the spotlight.

Cooperation and collaborations will be essential, as reflected in the scheduled Western Balkans Conference to be held in June.

Next month, together with Presidents Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen, France will organise a summit that will bring together the leaders of the European Union and the African Union. The objective of this summit is to rebuild an economic and financial New Deal with Africa. The French presidency wishes to deploy an agenda in the field of education, health and climate that is equal to the challenges facing Africa.

This year has already been announced as the European Year of Youth, and the leadership displayed by young people on climate issues has shown the power of an engaged collective group of society. The youth movement has pushed the green agenda up the list of political priorities. A range of legislative proposals this year will set out the difficult detail of how we can achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. It will be challenging and disruptive but it is also the only option remaining after years of delayed action on climate and emissions. Action is urgently needed, and the disruption has to be accepted but also managed, to ensure fairness of impact and that the right supports are in place to protect the most vulnerable in society. This philosophy has become part of the general psyche in the course of living with a global pandemic that poses an increased threat to the lives of certain vulnerable groups.

Finally, we will of course have the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe. At the EESC we have engaged, organised events and consultations, and strived to ensure that we act as a conduit for the voices of citizens and communities all over Europe. It is vital that the EU finds its personal touch and connects with all of these voices. It remains to be seen if CoFoE will deliver on this, but the EESC will continue to be a connecting point for citizens, ensuring all perspectives are heard in the debates on shaping our futures together.

Cillian Lohan,

EESC Vice President for Communication

DIARY DATES

31 January 2022, Brussels

Critical raw materials: an essential building block for the future of Europe

4 February 2022, Brussels

A renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling (2021-2025)

11 February 2022, Brussels

Conference on fundamental rights in the digital age

24 February 2022, Brussels

Shaping Europe together, event on the Conference on the Future of Europe, EESC

23- 24 February 2022, Brussels

EESC plenary session

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 **Stefan Back**, rapporteur for the opinion on the revision of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) including maritime transport and Market Stability Reserve.



STEFAN BACK: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE REVISED ETS

The EESC sees the Emissions Trading System proposal as one of the key proposals of the Fit for 55 package with its overarching goal of lowering CO_2 emissions by 55% by 2030. In order to achieve this, the ETS system has been made more ambitious and the number of available allowances has been reduced. The ETS proposal emphasises that all sectors need to contribute in order to meet the Fit for 55 objectives. Transport emissions have not decreased since 1990 and are therefore prioritised.

The proposal extends the ETS system to include maritime transport, including journeys to and from the EU; that is in addition to aviation, which was already included. It proposes a separate, parallel system for road transport and buildings where the traders are not operators, but businesses that distribute fossil fuels. For operators, this sends a price signal similar to a fuel tax.

Hopefully, the revised ETS will reduce CO_2 emissions, be an incentive to develop carbon-neutral solutions and drive innovation.

However, it also means increased costs for the sectors which are part of the ETS system. This in turn will affect the general cost level.

This may also weaken the competitiveness of European industry – unless other countries follow the EU's example.

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) seeks to ensure that cheap products produced under less rigorous conditions cannot compete on the EU market. However, it does not cover all sectors including services, such as transport, nor does it promote exports of goods and services.

Therefore, it is vitally important that EU climate diplomacy succeeds in convincing other countries to follow the EU's example.

There is also a risk that increasing costs will cause energy and mobility poverty.

The transformation to a carbon-free society will entail the need to adapt the workforce to new competence requirements through upskilling and reskilling.

The package plans to solve transition problems by means of various funds: the Modernisation Fund, the Innovation Fund and the Social Fund, which will largely be financed by revenue from the ETS and CBAM. However, if the proposals are adopted, those funds will not suffice for the vast investments needed for the transition.

Road transport and buildings as well as domestic EU waterborne transport also come under the Effort Sharing Regulation, meaning that their CO_2 reductions under the ETS will count toward the Member States' reduction quotas.

But it also means a risk of additional restrictions if a Member State needs more CO_2 reductions.

Goods transport by road and maritime transport may be hit particularly hard under the ETS system as there are as yet no reasonably priced zero-carbon solutions for those sectors.

To conclude, the main challenges identified in the EESC opinion are:

- Higher costs that will affect EU industry and services sectors, with a risk of reduced competitiveness on the world market
- The risk of energy and mobility poverty
- The need for industry and service sectors to adapt
- Reskilling and upskilling the workforce
- Attracting the investments needed to negotiate the transition. EU funds will help but are far from sufficient
- Convincing other countries to follow the EU's example – a major challenge for EU climate diplomacy.

Organised civil society strongly supports the package's intentions. However, for the package to become a success it is important to flag up problems in good time and to find appropriate solutions.

Obviously, the challenges are important, but if we do succeed, the potential benefits coming from the EU leading the way towards a carbon-neutral world are enormous. Provided we can handle the social issues and

create the necessary investments, we can lead the way towards a carbon-neutral world.

Stefan Back, EESC Member



LUCA JAHIER: TRIBUTE TO DAVID SASSOLI, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, WHO PASSED AWAY ON 11 JANUARY 2022

Today, we have lost a good friend, an excellent journalist, a remarkable politician and a great European. We can truly say that he changed the course of the European Union during the pandemic, keeping the Parliament open and defending the most vulnerable. He did this partly by taking unprecedented initiatives, as when during the first wave he emptied one of the Parliament buildings so that it could be used to care for women and single mothers suffering from COVID-19.

Europe still has much to say if only we, and you, can say it together. If we turn our efforts to the public interest, and if the Parliament listens to what people really want, fear and need. This was his guiding principle as a politician, which steered his work as President of the European Parliament after he was elected unexpectedly following the 2019 European elections.

He was able to bring the Parliament to agree on issues despite it being far more disparate than in the past. He was able to provide the president designate, Ursula von der Leyen, with a broader majority than that enjoyed by her predecessors on a transformative political agenda geared to the vital transition towards a Europe which is sustainable, innovative, rooted in values and rights, social and strategically autonomous.

He stood firm and pushed through all the measures needed to cope with the health crisis, guaranteeing the broadest possible democratic participation in the shaping of the many urgent decisions which have changed the face of Europe. And in the course of just a few months, he laid the groundwork for the proposals put forward by Mr Macron and Ms Merkel and the European Commission to be turned into the biggest recovery and resilience plan that Europe has ever seen. He united the European Parliament as it has rarely been united in the past.

He was a decent, kind man, journalist and politician. He understood situations and himself. Unlike so many, he never let his position go to his head. David Sassoli made his three innate gifts - consistency, loyalty and generosity - his strongest weapons in both life and politics. I often dealt with him directly, and remember his smile and expression. He always endeavoured to forge a personal connection with everyone he spoke with, and that was his hallmark and the key to his success.

He was an example for us all: he was on good terms with everyone and knew how to capitalise on that relationship in the public interest. He was a Catholic democrat, a deeply spiritual man who revered David Maria Turoldo, whose name he bore, Giuseppe Dossetti and Giorgio La Pira, whose legacy he made common knowledge during his days as a journalist.

I would like to quote some of his last words, delivered at Christmas and recorded just a few days before he went back to hospital: "We embody hope when we do not close our eyes to those in need, when we do not put up walls at our borders, when we fight all forms of injustice. Happy Christmas to us all!"

Thank you, David. My very best wishes to Sandra and the children you loved so much.

Luca Jahier

This article was published on the Italian website VITA on 11 January 2022.

***Luca Jahier**, Italian journalist, member of the European Economic and Social Committee since 2002 and Committee president from 2018 to 2020.*

ONE QUESTION TO...



One question to….

For our "One question to…" section, we asked EESC member Thierry Libaert to respond to a topical issue that continues to engage the public, namely tackling disinformation.

Thierry Libaert has been an EESC member since 2010. He is a member of the Diversity Europe Group. He has written numerous books and articles on Europe, communication, the environment and crises. Thierry Libaert is co-chair of the Consumers and Environment Category. (ehp)



The fight against disinformation should be a matter of utmost urgency

EESC info: You are the rapporteur for the opinion adopted by the EESC at its December 2021 session on European Commission Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation. How much of a threat is disinformation to democracy and what should civil society do, and what tools should it use, to prevent the propagation of fake news?

Thierry Libaert: Disinformation is a threat to democracies because it can weaken the trust we have in public institutions or science. Between a complicated truth and information that is false but can be understood immediately, we often prefer the false information. Disinformation is more than just a matter of gullibility, it is sometimes used for geopolitical or destabilising purposes, particularly during elections.

The key objective of the opinion adopted on 9 December 2021 is to call on the European Commission to take stronger action to prevent disinformation from emerging, not just to reduce the consequences. We can always try to limit the damage of a fire, but it is better to prevent the flames appearing in the first place.

There are many ways to combat disinformation. One is to attack the monetisation of it. Our working group saw that disinformation is a real business. Because false information spreads on average six times faster than true information and generates more comments and shares, it generates more activity for an internet platform. This makes it more likely to receive advertisement revenue. It was estimated that over EUR 400 million are wasted in this way each year.

We must avoid thinking that disinformation is only a matter for social networks and large digital platforms. Traditional media also have a responsibility, particularly TV news stations that keep giving an audience to a series of pseudo-experts. Media must be more vigilant about the true quality of their guests, and there needs to be greater media literacy so that the public can better analyse the information they receive.

The fight against disinformation must in no way serve as a pretext to attack freedom of expression. The media literacy we recommend mainly aims to allow everyone to really tell the difference between a scientific fact and a simple belief or opinion. Donald Trump's partisans in the USA, like populists in Europe – particularly those who were the origin of Brexit in the UK – have illustrated very well the danger propagation of false information poses to our democracies.

The fight against disinformation should be a matter of utmost urgency – this is the message our Committee hoped to send.

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.

In January, our surprise guests are **Maria Demertzis**, deputy director of the European think-tank Bruegel, which specialises in economics, established in Brussels in 2005, and **Jean-Dominique Giuliani**, president of the Robert Schuman

Foundation in Paris. The foundation, created in 1991 after the fall of the Berlin Wall, works towards European integration. They described the issues and challenges the French Presidency of the Council of the EU is facing at a pivotal moment in Europe's development.

Maria Demertzis is the deputy director of Bruegel. She has previously worked at the European Commission and the research department of the Dutch central bank. She has also held academic positions at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government in the United States and the University of Strathclyde in the United Kingdom, where she earned a doctorate in economics. She has published many articles in international academic journals and contributed regularly to the development of policies at the European Commission and the Dutch central bank.

Jean-Dominique Giuliani has been head of the Robert Schuman Foundation in Paris since 2000. A former special adviser to the European Commission, he was also Associate Councillor of the Council of State, head of staff of the cabinet of the President of the Senate René Monory (1992-1998), general director of the Taylor Nelson Sofres Group (1998-2001) and president of the Institut libre d'étude des relations internationales (ILERI) (2019-2021). Founder of J-DG.com – International Consultants, he is also a member of the supervisory board of ARTE France. He is the author of numerous works on the European Union, including La grande bascule – Le XXI^{e} siècle européen (2019) and co-wrote The Permanent Atlas of the European Union (2021). He is an editorial writer and regular contributor to various media outlets, and his expertise leads him to speak frequently in France and abroad on European issues, in which he is considered to be one of the best specialists. (ehp)



Maria Demertzis: New model for growth in Europe

With the start of the new year, France has assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. An overall ambitious presidency from the outset, it has at its core an agenda to explore a new model for growth for the European Union. This is absolutely essential in an era of transformative change.

While the main ingredients for growth - education and skills, entrepreneurship and finance - and a well-functioning state with solid institutions will always be needed, convincing and sustained growth will require a three-fold change of tack.

Policy cooperation, not competition, is at the heart of achieving good results. The concepts of competition and the level playing field drive most of the national and international regulations in place. However, the emergence of global tech giants and the entry of China into the global markets imply that it is very difficult to police and sustain the conditions that guarantee fair competition for all. The concept of the level playing field assumes that we are all equal. While we wish this were true, the fact is that not all countries are the same. Aiming for a level playing field just ignores that. Cooperation and coordination, on the other hand, aim to achieve results that are acceptable for all.

By means of an example in Europe, the EU stands to gain a lot more if it coordinates its actions internally and aims to achieve one single voice externally. The EU's decisive, speedy and clear-minded response during the pandemic crisis, and certainly by comparison to that during the financial crisis, showed just how effective cooperation can be to achieve good outcomes.

Greening, not greenwashing. The EU has set what are, without a doubt, and with good reason, incredibly ambitious goals for its climate policy. However, it has huge problems to overcome, including its own sincerity when it comes to "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk". The recent taxonomy of what actually constitutes green investments that has recently been unveiled is an example of a very important tool, but one that can be challenged in this respect.

The European Central Bank, an important player in this regard, has rightly placed the greening of monetary policy within its main objectives. However, it does not have the tools necessary to achieve this, and is in no way in the position to bear the cost of failing to achieve climate objectives without damaging its other financial objectives.

While the EU is good at greening its production, it is far from greening its consumption. The attempt to tax polluting imports, very much in the cards, is a good attempt in this direction, but it will need to ensure that it does not stall poorer countries' access to the EU market. This is a very delicate balance that the EU will need to manage, as incentives to greenwash are very visible.

Time for alliances of the "non-like-minded". Too often we hear that to tackle global problems we need to form strategic alliances of the like-minded. Driven, understandably in a way, by the desire to make progress, Europe needs to talk with those that think and speak the same way. This, the argument goes, will give it scale and therefore greater bargaining power to deal with those that are not like-minded. However, when it comes to solving global problems, partial strategic alliances that achieve agreements then need to communicate those agreements to "the other side". And those on the other side of the alliances do not like to be confronted with "take it or leave it" deals. When it comes to global public goods, like the climate, everyone must sit on the "take" side of negotiations and contribute at a rate that is commensurate with their capacity. It is of the utmost importance to engage with non-like minded parties if we are to make sustainable progress.

It is necessary to change tack slightly when it comes to solving global and domestic problems alike. We can no longer afford "perfect competition", good intentions, or indeed to talk only to those who think like we do. Let's hope that 2022 will be the year to go that extra mile.

Maria Demertzis, Deputy Director of Bruegel



Jean-Dominique Giuliani: 2022 : An opportune time for an active revival

The European Union is making progress with every crisis. Faced with the virus, it was able to take action on both the health and economic fronts. Not for a very long time has the spirit of cooperation between Member States produced tangible results so quickly. The vaccines are there and are also being exported to other countries that need them. The massive support for the economy is having an effect and is prompting a rethink of the Union's economic governance. The European Central Bank has once again demonstrated its role as Europeans' shield and protector by making it possible to replenish financial circuits under pressure.

The Union must build on this responsiveness to continue its transformation.

It faces two major, perhaps even fundamental, challenges: its prosperity and its security. It must adopt operating rules for its economy that can handle the challenges of digital and environmental transformation. It can harness significant resources by pooling the use of markets to invest in the future. It should not be afraid of common debt when it comes to investing and thus moving towards a new economy. It has not been slow to identify its needs; it must now agree to review its principles of economic governance.

Its security is now threatened by revisionist powers at its borders: powers that are not able to compete with its economic success and that will consequently seek any pretext to upset, destabilise and thereby fight it. Armed with their pacifist principles, Europeans must learn to prepare for war so that they do not have to wage it. To win the war before it starts requires showing great determination to achieve genuine independence of thought and action.

If Europeans collectively meet these two imperatives, they will herald a new era of European integration.

The quiet power of a European Union united in meeting the challenges it faces is the best means of promoting its model of freedom and solidarity. In solidarity with each of its members and developing solidarity among all categories of Europeans, the Union is the torch-bearer of a model society, which places humans at the centre of all social organisation. It must be proud of this, and accept the role in the face of new autocratic adversaries who challenge it.

To do this, it must not be afraid of demonstrating power or creative imagination in economic matters. And it must be bold. Then the future will smile upon it.

Jean-Dominique Giuliani: President of the Robert Schuman Foundation

EESC NEWS



Turning recovery into success: the EESC underlines the key role of organised civil society

The EESC and the European Commission need to work together for a Europe that overcomes the pandemic and consolidates the recovery – a Europe that is prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. This was the main message addressed by EESC President Christa Schweng to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight Maroš Šefčovič at the EESC's December plenary session.

Expressing satisfaction at the fact that many EESC proposals and recommendations included in the EESC Resolution of June 2021 were reflected in the European Commission Work Programme for 2022 **Ms Schweng** said that "our priorities tie in closely with those of the European Commission, which we will continue to support in the implementation of its ambitious goals. We also need to make sure that organised civil society thrives and lives in an open, values-based society. Let us join forces to make Europe a truly great place to be and prosper!"

For her part, acknowledging the work done by the EESC, **Ms von der Leyen** said that "the Committee has always been very supportive and very firm in its mission: to make people's voices heard - the voice of businesses, workers and other civil society organisations. We are and we will remain close partners, both in annual policy planning and building our long-term vision."

Echoing her words, **Mr Šefčovič** thanked the Committee for its close cooperation with the European Commission, saying that this kept "the bonds between the two institutions alive and kicking" and noting that "the EESC members are the best ambassadors for the European Union". (mp)



European Year of Youth 2022: Focus on the results, not the hype

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the declaration of 2022 as the European Year of Youth but has warned it should go beyond mere promotional activities and should contribute towards the EU's youth strategy with clear plans and engagement. The initiative must reach the most vulnerable young people and those in disadvantaged areas.

To achieve this, the EU should develop clear indicators and goals focusing on policies for young people and on work across different sectors, so that the activities that are organised do not become an end in themselves, the EESC said in the opinion on the European Year of Youth 2022.

"The EESC is looking forward to engaging positively with the European Year of Youth 2022. We want it to produce concrete outcomes for European youth in policy areas that impact on their lives," said the

rapporteur for the opinion, **Michael McLoughlin**.

The EESC expressed concern, however, that the agenda and priorities for the year appeared crowded, as they contain a very large number of commitments, references to other initiatives, budgets and policy areas.

"It is important to have clarity and focus in the proposal. Sometimes less is more and there may be a fear that a long list of policy areas and shared responsibilities can obscure a clear focus on outcomes, responsibility and results," Mr McLoughlin stressed.

The EESC agrees that the timing and the context in which the decision was taken to designate 2022 as the Year of Youth were right. The COVID-19 crisis has been particularly harsh on young people and will have long-lasting consequences for their education and their social, financial and mental well-being. However, the EESC also fears the proposal has been developed at breakneck speed.

This presents the danger of important youth-related initiatives becoming more about high-profile political announcements than long-term systematic development.

It also presents a challenge for the implementation of the Year at national level, as time has been extremely tight for national authorities to draw up actions in the different Member States. They may also struggle with funding to cover the costs of the activities envisaged for the Year.

The EESC therefore proposes a budget totalling EUR 10 million, instead of the proposed EUR 8 million, of which two million would be earmarked for coordination at national level. This is necessary in order to ensure sufficient impact and encourage participation. (ll)



EU fight against disinformation must target propagators and protect fundamental rights

In a recent opinion, the EESC calls for more to be done to target the people and organisations that are at the source of disinformation, prioritising prevention rather than cure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the threat posed by disinformation into sharp focus. Against this backdrop, following a critical assessment the European Commission published guidance in May 2021 aimed at strengthening the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation to create a safer, more trustworthy online space.

In an opinion issued in response, the EESC says the Commission focuses too much on content and its moderation – and not enough on those who propagate it in the first place.

"The content is constantly changing and the platforms that are used evolve, but the main actors remain basically the same and the motives do not change", says **Thierry Libaert**, rapporteur for the opinion.

The EESC notes that disinformation is a booming business and welcomes the Commission's emphasis on countering its revenue-generating power. False information spreads six times faster than true information, is

liked and shared more often, produces more activity, and attracts more attention, generating more visitors and hence more value and more advertising revenue.

As Facebook whistleblower **Frances Haugen** recently revealed, far from combating the phenomenon, her employer had made it an integral part of its business model.

However, in order to better tackle disinformation at its source, the Commission should consider an "arsenal" of more binding economic, legal and financial tools that go beyond voluntary commitments by online advertisers.

"The European Union must acquire more capabilities to be able to fight effectively against disinformation, which is systematically spread by hostile powers, often driven by governments of certain third countries, among which are Russia and China", says the rapporteur.

National authorities need more support from intelligence services, the EESC says, while urging EU-wide cooperation and knowledge-sharing. However, with media freedom and legal systems at risk in several EU countries, the Commission must ensure that the fight against disinformation is not used as a pretext for limiting public freedoms – first and foremost freedom of expression.

Particularly for countries bordering Russia, the Commission should promote more action on content produced in languages other than English and focus more on lesser-known platforms, such as VKontakte, Rumble, Odysee, Gab and Parler, as well as on big names. While the former have smaller audiences, they can be less transparent and more easily target specific groups.

Because new networks are emerging all the time, the means they use are increasingly sophisticated (such as "deep fakes") and some applications straddle the line between a platform and a private messaging service (such as Telegram), new risks must be countered as soon as they are detected. (dm)



EESC asks the European Commission to be more ambitious in efforts to steer the EU economy and finance towards sustainability

At its December plenary, the European Economic and Social Committee held a debate with European Commissioner McGuinness on how to achieve a greener, more sustainable and more digitalised European economic and financial system.

The plenary saw a number of opinions adopted in an effort to help pave the way for a truly more sustainable EU. In one own-initiative opinion, the EESC proposes that a series of new indicators be developed to complement GDP and help with the transition. In another opinion, the EESC supports the goal of redirecting investments, but thinks many of the measures proposed by the EC in its renewed sustainable finance strategy often appear too hesitant and disregard the critical concept of social sustainability.

Moreover, EU taxonomy does not embrace environmental and social goals in equal measure and leaves doubts about controversial economic activities. Lastly, in a third opinion, the EESC welcomes the idea of a new voluntary European Green Bond Standard and makes critical recommendations as to how to turn it into a truly powerful instrument to help direct investors towards investments in projects that have a positive impact on the environment. (tk)



Volunteering deserves wider recognition in the EU

The European Economic and Social Committee has called upon the EU and the Member States to offer systematic and thoughtful support to volunteering. By doing so, it would acknowledge volunteering's immense impact on Europe's social development and its crucial role in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals and fostering social inclusion.

In its own-initiative opinion on volunteering, the EESC proposed that the EU declare 2025 the European Year of Volunteers, extend EU volunteer schemes and funding to older people and develop an EU-wide method to collect volunteering data that countries and organisations could share.

The opinion rapporteur, **Krzysztof Pater**, said: "The future of Europe will not be built by decision-makers, politicians or civil society organisations, but by active citizens and volunteers – by people who devote their free time to the benefit of society."

In Europe, one in five people volunteer every year. A recent survey showed that 25% of young Europeans were involved in an organised volunteering activity every year. Every day, volunteers of all ages and backgrounds donate their time to activities for other people or the environment, strengthening society and building a sustainable future.

"Systematic and full-scale support at EU and national level is needed because the impact of volunteering is many times greater than the potential costs," Mr Pater said. According to available data, volunteers' activity has real economic value, amounting in many countries to more than 2% of GDP.

Since the last European Year of Volunteering in 2011, volunteering has begun to gradually disappear from the European agenda. It has featured there only sporadically: the EU created the EU Aid Volunteers and the European Solidarity Corps and made volunteering a priority in its Europe for Citizens Programme.

In the EESC's view, the contribution of volunteers, and the well-being and sense of connection they experience in return, deserve wider recognition. (ll)



National recovery plans: a chance to curb youth unemployment

With COVID-19, youth unemployment soared in many Member States, pushing up the number of young people who neither work nor are in school or in training (NEETs). In a recent own initiative opinion, the European Economic and Social Committee argues that national recovery plans (NRPs) represent a unique chance to reverse this trend and secure decent work for all young Europeans.

"National recovery plans are a unique opportunity which needs to be seized, with inclusive governance and in open and transparent dialogue," said the rapporteur of the opinion**, Nicoletta Merlo**.

Expressing regret that "no significant consultation of social partners, youth organisations or organised civil society" took place during the preparation of the NRPs, Ms Merlo said the EESC called for those stakeholders to be involved in the implementation and monitoring of those plans.

"In this way we can safeguard social dialogue at national level, which is essential to make sure that public money is well spent so that we can have an inclusive recovery. We want Member States to develop quality jobs and inclusive services for young people, and in particular those with disabilities and those who are vulnerable for different reasons," Ms Merlo stressed.

The plans should pay particular attention to upskilling young people who need it and a special focus should be placed on open-ended contracts and decent working conditions that limit the risk of many of young workers ending up in precarious employment, which is now often the case.

According to recent Eurostat figures, one in six people below the age of 30 has lost their job due to the economic consequences of COVID-19. Especially worrying is the rising number of NEETs, whose situation further worsened due to school drop-outs, a lack of appropriate guidance, a lack of job opportunities and job losses.

One way of stopping young people from leaving school early is to promote quality traineeships, which can also help them to integrate into labour markets more easily. This is why the EESC calls for a ban on unpaid internships and for decent remuneration for all interns. (ll)



EESC sees EU-US partnership as anchor for democracy, peace and security

With China and Russia on the offensive, a renewed and reliable transatlantic partnership is the key to maintaining international and legal order and peace. The EESC supports the idea of an Alliance of Democracies, ensuring that civil society has a significant say in the joint defence of universal values and rights.

In an own-initiative opinion adopted at its December plenary session, the EESC stressed that, together, the EU and the US should be gatekeepers for the rule of law and human rights for all, while also making clear the importance of transatlantic relations for Europe's place in the world.

Christian Moos, rapporteur for the opinion, underlined: "The idea of universal human rights continues to unite large parts of the EU with the free democracies of the world, above all the United States of America."

Peter Clever, co-rapporteur, added: "The universal character of human rights is expressed in this comprehensive self-commitment of all in the implementation [of these rights]. This is what makes them valuable as a basis for dialogue and understanding".

The EESC strongly underlines that only a vibrant civil society can create enthusiasm and safeguard values, and urges the EU to set-up a transatlantic platform for organised civil society with contact points in North America and Europe. In addition, transatlantic civil society dialogue should be based on a range of topics, including civil rights, disinformation and climate action.

The EESC strongly supports the idea of an Alliance of Democracies and calls on the EU to join a united front with the US and the world's other democracies to pursue a 'strategy of cooperative containment' towards China that respects and safeguards legitimate Chinese interests, but results in clear, robust diplomatic responses when rights are violated, as in the case of the Uighurs and Hong Kong protesters. (at)



EESC adopts opinion on anti-money laundering legislative package

The European Commission has submitted its new 2021 legislative package on anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) to the co-legislators and the European Economic and Social Committee.

In an opinion adopted during the December plenary session, the EESC fully supports the proposals, but also stresses the urgency of implementing these measures and suggests key additions. The creation of the new Anti-Money Laundering Authority (AMLA) is broadly supported. The Committee also reiterates its proposal for

a European Pact to combat behaviour that damages the ethical and political principles of our democracies and undermines public goods, and suggests the creation of a new civil society advisory body in the field of AML. In addition, the Regulation on crypto-assets needs to be implemented as a matter of urgency. The European Commission should also push for urgent action regarding the delayed and incomplete transposition of the previous AML Directives in some Member States, and specific measures should be put in place to monitor shell companies. It also should consider how to extend the measures to cover money laundering channels outside the financial system. Finally, the EESC firmly believes that it is necessary to draw up a new, realistic, comprehensive list of high-risk third countries. (tk)



Green transition not a scientific rhetoric but a question of survival

The Conference on the geopolitics of the Green Deal, held by the EESC together with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) on 6 December 2021, highlighted the wide-ranging geopolitical implications of the Green Deal, both for Europe and the world as a whole. The EESC is ready to play its part in this process, ensuring clear civil society ownership of the European Green Deal (EGD).

Almost 30 years after the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, climate-damaging emissions have risen massively, according to the emissions gap report released in October 2021.

Christa Schweng, President of the EESC, emphasised: "This is why the green transition is a question of survival for both Europe and the world at large. Organised civil society can play a crucial role. We should not forget that a successful green transition first and foremost needs the support of our citizens."

Commissioner for Energy **Kadri Simson** added**:** "Our relations with our partners will change. Everyone must be on board if we are to solve the climate crisis. A new energy system will bring about new relationships."

Barbara Pompili, French Minister for the Ecological Transition, noted that the Green Deal and the green transition would dramatically affect international relations. Europe has to be as ambitious as possible in cutting emissions, protecting and restoring biodiversity and fighting pollution. Solidarity plays a vital role in securing the Green Deal and ensuring a truly just transition. The main focus should be on the green transition of the energy sector, and the EU's geopolitical actions should therefore help reduce the volatility of energy prices, while lowering the risks related to the promotion and expansion of clean energy use. Open strategic autonomy requires new value chains, where all developments must be accompanied by quality local jobs and returns for local communities. (at)



EU-facilitated dialogue remains key for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia

The 51st Western Balkans Follow-up Committee meeting placed conflict resolution and normalisation of relations between Kosovo* and Serbia in the spotlight. The meeting, presided by Ionuţ Sibian, hosted prominent speakers from the ranks of EU officials, Western Balkans experts, as well as civil society representatives from the local communities, all of whom agreed that EU-facilitated dialogue was the only way to move forward.

Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, provided an overview of the EU-facilitated dialogue and related challenges, expressing regret that the discussion once more had to be centred on conflict resolution, rather than completion of the normalisation process.

Marko Prelec from the Crisis Group stated that a comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia was not a realistic goal at the moment, as any such agreement would include mutual recognition.

Leon Hartwell from the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) lamented the fact that there was very little political will to implement the existing 30 EU-brokered agreements between Kosovo and Serbia.

Branislav Staníček from the European Parliament's Research Service (EPRS) underlined the importance of transatlantic cooperation for the success of the normalisation dialogue. Participants from local civil society organisations from Belgrade, Pristina and North Mitrovica highlighted the importance of creating conditions for bridging the ethnic divide between the communities.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. (at)



Fit for 55 climate policies must ensure balance between fairness, emission reductions and competitiveness

The European Economic and Social Committee has called for a series of measures to ensure everyone is consulted on and benefits from the European Commission’s Fit for 55 proposals, which put the EU on track to cut carbon emissions by 55 % by 2030.

''Reaching the revised 2030 targets, as proposed in the Fit for 55 package, will unevenly impact regions and communities across Europe. It is therefore of utmost importance that adequate solidarity mechanisms are properly designed and adequately financed, towards a socially fair, competitive and green transition" said **Cillian Lohan**, Vice-President of the EESC.

The EESC, in its opinions (a total of 22 opinions), strongly supports the package as a necessary means to accelerate the energy transition and become climate neutral. However, it also stresses that policies must ensure the right balance between social fairness, emission reductions and competitiveness.

Common recommendations from the EESC:

- While some sectors are heavily impacted by the proposed measures of the package, the transition to a green industry will generate possibilities for other sectors. The goal must be to ensure balanced policies that support those negatively affected by the climate transition.
- Upskilling and reskilling programmes for both entrepreneurs and workers are needed in order to ensure access to the newest available technologies and digital and sustainable skills.
- The involvement of civil society is key for transparency, for accountability and for establishing a balanced economic policy across the EU, where all interests are reconciled.
- The social partners and relevant civil society organisations have an important role to play and must be involved in both the planning and implementation phases of the Fit for 55 package.

It is vital that the transition leaves no one behind, which means that citizens must be at the heart of the green transition. (mr)



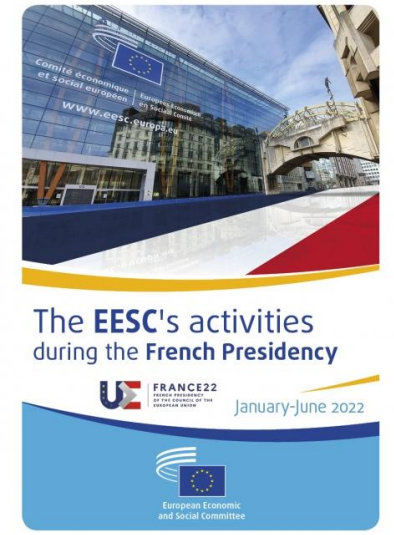
The EU recovery plan must contribute to a just transition for EU resource and energy-intensive industries

The European Economic and Social Committee adopted an own-initiative opinion on how resources and energy-intensive industries (REIIs) can take advantage of the EU recovery plan for a socially acceptable transition towards de-carbonisation and digitalisation. The EESC encourages the Commission and the other EU institutions to guarantee a level playing-field within the single market, in order to avoid unbalanced advantages to industry depending on each Member State's approach.

Industrial production in Europe has been hit hard by the pandemic, and while European companies in sectors with high consumption of resources and energy were already in a precarious situation, they are now faced with this further, unexpected crisis. At the same time, European companies in resource and energy-intensive sectors are also faced with the pressing need to adapt to the European policy objectives to address climate change through the implementation of the European Green Deal.

''The industrial transition will only be achieved if the energy transition is implemented. Research and innovation and proper implementation of the EU recovery plans are crucial for a just transition in line with the carbon neutrality goal. For that, the availability of sufficient, affordable low-carbon energy sources that make low-carbon industrial production possible will be key,'' said rapporteur **Andrés Barceló Delgado.**

''Enabling a just transition for resource and energy-intensive industries is key. The EU recovery facility and the related national recovery and resilience plans must lead to the creation and maintenance of quality jobs, involve the social partners and support labour transitions through reskilling and upskilling,'' said co-rapporteur **Enrico Gibellieri.** (ks)



The activities of the EESC during the French presidency of the European Union

A new brochure presents the main activities activities and initiatives to be undertaken by the EESC to support the efforts of the incoming French presidency.

The French Presidency of the Council of the European Union comes at a decisive moment, when the European Union is facing several health, social, economic and environmental challenges.

Among its top priorities are: the ambition of a more sovereign Europe in the areas of migration, defence and neighbourhood policy, alongside other major challenges such as building a new European model bringing together economic, environmental and social aspects, or strengthening our shared sense of belonging - the raison d'être of the European project and the challenge at the heart of the Conference on the Future of Europe. During its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, France also intends to pay particular attention to the voice of young people, who will be celebrated in 2022 with the European Year of Youth.

Determined to cooperate closely with the French Presidency and to make the voice of European civil society organisations heard, the European Economic and Social Committee looks forward to working together with the presidency to achieve a strong European Union that is close to its citizens.

This brochure is available in EN, FR and DE on the EESC's website. Hard copies can be ordered from: vipcese@eesc.europa.eu. (af)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Setting out a New Vision for the Future of Europe

By the EESC Employers' Group

Europe’s future is closely linked to the future of its industry: strong ambitions require strong and innovative companies that have the means to meet the needs of the digital and green transitions while boosting EU competitiveness.

This is why the Employers' Group organised its flagship event in the context of the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) tackling these topics with innovative CEO's, EESC members, representatives of European business associations and with the special participation of **Herman Van Rompuy**, President Emeritus of the European Council. Based on the speeches by the keynote speakers, the panel debate, comments and questions from the audience, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Re-infuse hope and optimism into the European project**: As the pandemic continues to evolve, building forward better can only be done successfully if an entrepreneurial mindset is added to the recipe.

2. **A more competitive Europe - enhancing prosperity for present and future generations**: CoFoE should concentrate all its efforts on delivering tangible results in the post-COVID rebuilding of the economy, ensuring that Europe becomes the most attractive place to start, run and grow a business.

3. **Making full use of the current institutional framework**: The EU should make full use of the existing institutional framework, as it can achieve many of its objectives without amending the Treaties.

4. **Breaking the silos: cross-sectoral partnerships to enable innovation and growth**: In a highly volatile world, the networking capacity of working across silos, forming highly agile networks both locally and globally across digital ecosystems represents a key element to enable innovation and growth, promoting a sustainable growth model for Europe.

5. **Collaboration between governments and enterprises to succeed in the twin transition**: To accelerate the green and digital transitions, various initiatives need to be brought together in one coherent policy.

6. **New sustainable business models**: Europe’s future is closely linked to the future of its industry and strong ambitions require strong and innovative companies. The future of businesses depends on their ability to adapt and reinvent themselves through new, more sustainable business models.

7. **Talent, education and skills fit for the future:** The importance of skills and education is a core shared responsibility to innovate across the entire ecosystem - critical for Europe’s competitiveness and for its success in the digital and green transition.

More information on the event and the engagement of the EESC Employers' Group at CoFoE:

Full report: https://europa.eu/!76xuy6

Video of event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd9AWe1W3nE&t=1s

Manifesto "Making the EU Capable of Action": https://europa.eu/!qRGjVK

Event website with further information: https://europa.eu/!Qxx7C9 (dv/kr)



End the deadlock to the COVID vaccine patents

By the EESC Workers' Group

As Europeans recover from the Christmas break, a wave of COVID cases sweeps the continent: the new omicron variant has increased infections exponentially worldwide. However, thanks to the build-up of immunity and previous vaccinations, as well as the natural evolution of the virus towards less lethal and aggressive variants, the extremely high numbers have come with a lower share of severe diseases, hospitalisations and deaths.

Nevertheless, our health systems are once again overloaded. And while vaccination rates are very high in rich countries in general, many parts of the world, which also have less prepared healthcare systems, do not enjoy such rates. The pandemic keeps claiming lives worldwide, hitting developing countries particularly hard, and the virus keeps mutating in those areas at an alarming rate. Sometimes, this develops into milder versions such as Omicron, but this is not always the case.

To finally overcome this pandemic, we need greater efforts on vaccines. These have been developed thanks to outstanding advances in science and medicine and billions in public investments, so vaccines must remain a public good and the rollout should be under the control of democratic institutions. We need patents on COVID-19 vaccines and wider health products and technologies to be waived temporarily under the TRIPS agreement at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The TRIPS waiver was proposed by India and South Africa a year ago in order to ensure that, during this pandemic, intellectual property rights cannot become barriers to urgent, universal and affordable access to and development of related health products, including the vaccines needed to combat COVID-19. More than 100 countries back the waiver at the WTO. However, the European Union is among the WTO members which have yet to support the proposed waiver of COVID-19 related intellectual property rights under the TRIPS agreement, including for COVID-19 vaccines.

Failure to urgently agree on a waiver would mean that a few major pharmaceutical companies will be able to prevent other manufacturers from producing COVID-19 vaccines, impeding the EU’s efforts to scale up production at home, and the manufacturing of vaccines in developing countries around the world. It will also endanger the EU’s and the global economic recovery by prolonging this pandemic. As the new wave this Christmas break has shown, the endemic end of the pandemic might be in sight, but it is a long way ahead, and will take much longer and claim many more lives worldwide if a large part of the population still lacks access to the vaccines. (prp)



EESC study reveals mismatch between zeal for volunteering and actual opportunities

By the EESC Diversity Europe Group

People in all European Member States are willing to volunteer, confirms a recent EESC study on New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union. However, although there is plenty of zeal for volunteering, actual volunteering rates vary across Member States, largely due to varying levels of tradition and infrastructure.

The study also reveals two pan-European trends in volunteering infrastructure: new players are becoming more involved in creating volunteer energy and matching it to volunteer opportunities, and spontaneous volunteering is increasing due to new technologies and social media.

The study suggests investing in the development of third-party involvement and removing barriers to spontaneous, individual volunteering. It also recommends helping volunteer organisations to better tailor volunteer activities to the preferences of potential volunteers.

The EESC commissioned the study at the request of the Diversity Europe Group, whose members are in close contact with volunteers on a daily basis and play a crucial role in organising and sustaining volunteer energy.

The study was published in December in the context of International Volunteer Day and presented at an online event organised by the Diversity Europe Group. The press event was moderated by the vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group, **Kinga Joó**, with an introduction by the president of the Diversity Europe Group, **Séamus Boland**, and a presentation by the lead author of the study, Dr **Lucas Meijs**, and the rapporteur for the latest EESC opinion on *Volunteers – Citizens building the future of Europe*, **Krzysztof Pater**.

You can find out more about the study, the EESC opinion and the study presentation on the EESC website. (jk)

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



99 students come together to fight fake news

Over the coming months, students from secondary schools across Europe will get ready to brainstorm together on how to fight disinformation in Europe. In March, they will select the most popular ideas to present to EU leaders.

"The truth about lies. Youth challenging disinformation" is the title of the EESC's 13th flagship youth event "Your Europe, Your Say" (YEYS).

561 secondary schools from the 27 EU Member States and the 5 candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) applied to participate in YEYS 2022. Registration closed on 2 December 2021. The participating schools, one per country, were selected in a random draw on 9 December 2021. The list of selected schools is available online.

The debating sessions will take place remotely on 31 March and 1 April 2022. Preparations to welcome all 99 students and their supervising teachers are in full swing at the EESC.

By mid-January 2022, EESC members acting as mentors will start visiting the selected schools to help students prepare for the main sessions.

The event is intended to raise awareness of the dangers of disinformation and to encourage young people to become more active in fighting fake news.

YEYS2022 has been flagged as one of the main events of the European Year of Youth 2022. (ck)



Delivery riders are modern cowboys: a photo exhibition

The EESC is hosting a virtual exhibition of photographs by French photographer Frédéric Stucin, staging food deliverers as a distinctive feature of today's city life and a new form of employment that often eludes European health and safety provisions for workers.

The exhibition features a series of 20 images depicting riders making deliveries for Uber Eats, Deliveroo and other platforms of a similar type.

"*Hurtling through the city day and night, on bikes and scooters, these riders remind me of those legendary riders delivering mail for the Pony Express in the US*", says **Frédéric Stucin**.

The photos also show the tough conditions they work under - being out in all weather, having to wait outside restaurants, paying their own transport costs and fines, coping with inconsiderate platforms and difficult clients, accepting that they may be involved in an accident.

The platforms they work for speak about flexibility and the freedom to choose their working hours, but many of these workers are denied many basic labour rights. There has been some progress and some platforms now offer slightly better conditions, while the workers themselves are starting to set up some mutual support mechanisms.

"*With these pictures, I wanted to pay tribute to brave people who deserve our respect,*" says **Stucin**.

The photos shine a light on the issues surrounding this growing legion of atypical workers, in parallel with an EESC opinion on social dialogue as a tool to promote health and safety at work, to be debated at the January plenary.

The exhibition, which is being organised in conjunction with the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, will run from **15 January to 15 February** 2022. Discover it HERE. (ck)

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