Luca Jahier, EESC President
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the European Economic and Social Committee for the European Citizens' Initiative Day 2020, thus its ninth edition!

And let me thank, first, our ECI Day partners: the European Committee of the Regions, Democracy International, the European Citizen Action Service, the ECI Campaign and our research partner Bertelsmann Stiftung.

The ECI Day has always been a joint project of the EU institutions and civil society partners, a principle that we follow every day in the EESC.

In a time of transformations, where traditional forms of political participation are being questioned and new forms are tested here and there, we should be wise enough to be open to change. However, such changes must not compromise the strength of traditional ways of participation, time-tested and continuously adapted, and the in-depth force of institutions.

By this, I mean representative democracy and structured dialogue with representative CSOs.

We can be proud, as it was the EU that first opened to new instruments for more participation at a transnational level. This is when the European citizens' initiative was born and the first transnational tool of participatory democracy was enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, in the framework of the article 11 on what we call "participatory democracy".

The tool itself has great potential to give EU citizens more influence and has certainly not reached its full potential yet.

Over the years, the political attention given to the ECI has ebbed and flowed, but thanks to the unfailing support of citizens and – I do not hesitate to say – my own institution, the European Economic and Social Committee, the ECI has reached the next level.

ECI has been at the heart of EESC's mission since its conception and we have taken the lead role amongst the institutions, in promoting this new participatory instrument.

Since the launch of ECI in 2012, the EESC has been organising the annual ECI Day conference, a high profile event, to listen to and facilitate networking with all stakeholders, provide a bridge with EU institutions, and address proposals for improvement.

After the first few years, the ECI was a source of disappointment for civil society and organisers, who found it very burdensome and overly bureaucratic in relation to the very limited impact that it actually had on EU agenda-setting.

In July 2016, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion on key proposals for the revision of the ECI.

At the 2017 ECI Day, First Vice-President Frans Timmermans announced the revision of the ECI Regulation. The Commission proposal followed shortly afterwards and became part of the legislative State of the Union package. The following year, at the 2018 ECI Day, all three Institutions attended (Mr Timmermans for the European Commission, Deputy Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency Monika Panayotova and MEP György Schöpflin, General Rapporteur for the European Parliament) to state their negotiating positions.

In 2019, Mr Timmermans addressed the participants of the ECI Day on the content of the new simplified ECI Regulation and we recognised that the strong improvements of the new ECI Regulation, which finally entered into force this 1st January 2020, had taken up quintessential points made by the EESC.

This year I have to regret that our two administrations, EESC and European Commission, have not found a creative way to join forces for a unique ECI event and so we have two separate Days. I hope this could change next year.

Distinguished speakers, dear guests,

The themes of the 2020 ECI Day are "today" and "beyond". I have so far only spoken about the "today" aspect.

However, global trends go way beyond a simple institutionalisation of agenda-setting instruments for citizens. The digital age makes it possible to connect and have a say outside of elections and also outside
the traditional political constituency and organised CSO.

Additionally, new global concerns have emerged, such as climate change, viral mutations and migration. Political parties may have different solutions, but they cannot address these big issues by proposing manifestos every four or five years.

As you all know, the EESC has led the way in this regard. On 5 May 2018, together with the European Commission, we organised the first European Citizens' Panel on the Future of Europe, with 100 citizens selected randomly.

The goal was to adopt a list of questions as the basis for a large consultation launched online by the European Commission, and for citizens' debates all around Europe, to present conclusions for the December EU Council, lastly feeding into the Sibiu declaration of the Heads of State and Government.

As a result, we were witness to a modern version of the Greek tradition of sortition, as advocated by David Van Reybrouck in his book "Against Elections: The Case for Democracy", where he quotes an African proverb: "Whatever you do for me but without me, you do to me."

In other words, he says, "Even with the best of intentions, those who govern the people without involving them govern them in only a limited sense." Citizens must be able to be part of the decision-making process in order to better understand the challenge of compromise and the limits of political liberty.

At the same time, we should not accept the new digital age without any critical thought. We are already well aware of the danger of fake news; and of big data; and the enormous power consigned to very few that, through algorithms, can manipulate and control us.

Therefore, let's not conclude that every single tweet and post should be given equal attention and value. Today's guest speaker, Jamie Susskind, reminds us in his book "Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech" that – in life as in politics – there are two important truths:

- Freedom is greatest when defined by its limits; and
- All fascinating novelties can become dangerous if accepted too fast as miracle solutions without further reflection.

I will quote here another great mind of our times: Noah Yuval Harari, who said in his book "A Brief History of Human Kind" that "in order to change an existing imagined order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order."

We have learned the lesson of the established liberal democracy. It works as an order only under two conditions:

- Structured participation, with the right to have answers but also the duty to be accountable;
- The principle of rule of law and a large system of independent checks and balances.

Therefore, the key question for the afternoon sessions is: are we ready to make it happen that citizens who have so far only been governed can step into the world of professional politics and govern at national and supranational levels as efficiently as traditional politicians?

And how? We can use the existing "constitutional" provision of EU treaty, mainly art 11 and of course also the ECI, to better develop this perspective in a structured way, also in the large and most awaited Conference on the Future of Europe, that should start next 9th of May and continue for two years.

I think we have now a very high profile panellist to respond to this questions: as first we have with us the European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, who as everyone know has a key responsibility for the Conference on the Future of Europe.

And finally, we have you – our participants.

On behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee, I welcome you to the 2020 ECI Day and hope we have an inspiring debate.