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Is the EU rising to the challenge of COVID-19? Can people expect the EU to help them weather the storm this time, or will they feel let down as they did with the other two major crises of this century? As the outbreak sweeps across Europe taking a huge human toll and sowing massive economic havoc, EESC president Luca Jahier looks at the EU's response so far, pointing to bold actions that only yesterday would have been taboo. But there is an extra mile to go, he says, charting a course that could help European leaders find a meeting ground. (II)

Available Languages:

Editorial

Europe must not only be saved, it must be relaunched!

Dear Readers,

The COVID-19 outbreak has turned into a fast-moving emergency, figures and measures are constantly changing across Europe and the world, affecting all levels of society.

Not since the end of the Second World War, has the global community faced such a dramatic crisis. No government in Europe or elsewhere can possibly think to solve such a pandemic alone. All the Member States must come together, to support each other and to coordinate a concerted action. A piecemeal approach by the individual Member States is a sure recipe for disaster. If we get this wrong, we may not have another opportunity to get it right.

While our thoughts go to those who have been directly affected by the pandemic, we pay tribute to the many people, not only in the health sector, that are fighting against the COVID-19, displaying courage and an unbelievable sense of responsibility. Their efforts have to be supported and praised, while guaranteeing health and safety measures for all of them.

In the past weeks, EU institutions have worked around the clock to deliver an emergency plan. The EESC has also been active in providing timely advice and input, calling for a full recovery plan, of the scale of the Marshall plan or the New Deal. I think we can all agree that the EU has done more in four weeks than in the four years following the 2008 crisis, with interventions already decided that are estimated over EUR 3 trillion.

The EU has changed its economic rules, which until now seemed to be set in stone. It has established a strong EU safety net of more than EUR 500 billion to protect European workers, businesses and governments and face the many urgencies of the pandemic crisis. It has changed its economic rules, activated the general escape clause of the Stability and growth Pact, extended flexibility on state aid rules, provided the largest injection of liquidity by the ECB (already EUR 870bn), as well as an additional €40bn of loans from the European Investment Bank and the €37bn put on the table by the European Commission through the Structural Funds. Last but not least, the Eurogroup has proposed a further package, including SURE, to support national unemployment insurance scheme; a new lending scheme of the EIB and the possible use of the European Stability Mechanism's precautionary credit lines for exceptional healthcare expenditures of the euro area Member States without further conditionality, while also granting the use of the Balance of Payments Facility to support Member States that have not adopted
the euro.

But the Heads of state and government still have to take historic and crucial decisions: **Europe must not only be saved, it must be relaunched!**

After the European Parliament's vote on the latest Commission proposals to address the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak in the EU last week, and in light of the solid package of measures proposed on 9 April by the Eurogroup to support the European economy, the meeting of Heads of state and government this Thursday cannot fail.

I am confident **the EU has now more than ever the chance and the obligation to rise from its ashes like the Phoenix.**

63 years ago, the founding nations of the European Union signed the Treaty of Rome and made a dream come true: a united continent, founded on a shared vision, on shared principles and a common destiny.

The global recovery effort will require all parts of society to work together. Being a consultative body, representing European organized civil society, we have a duty to help carve new solutions in the spirit of a renewed EU solidarity. The options are many, even though they are not fully articulated: ESM credit lines, ‘corona-bonds’, a euro-area Treasury, and even one-off joint expenditures.

The last mile is often the most difficult one, but we need to walk it now in order to ensure a more resilient and sustainable Europe, fighting inequalities and protecting the most vulnerable, workers and enterprises, promoting biodiversity and the transition to a low-carbon and circular economy, protecting the single market and a new digital strategy. **But first and foremost, preparing the ground for a fully-fledged EU Health Union.**

These are extraordinary times, causing unbearable pressure on EU citizens, companies and workers, who rightly fear for their health, their jobs and the future of their children. These moments call for a unanimous act of courage from all.

We want to be able to say, on 23 April, that the EU has been up to the challenge and has done **#WhateverItTakes to save its people, relaunch its economy and show the face of a new Union, more resilient and cohesive. This will be our #rEUnaissance.**

Luca Jahier
EESC President

**By EESC members**

**Dessine-moi...**

As of April we will be publishing a series of articles entitled **Dessine-moi...** written by EESC members.

It is with great emotion that we share with our EESCinfo readers some testimonials from our members, who have agreed to share their thoughts - in the form of interviews, opinions and messages - about this period when, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, it feels like time is standing still.

We would like to thank the following members for providing testimonials: **Isabel Caño Aguilar**, Vice-president for communication; **Milena Angelova**, Vice-president for budget; **Helena de Felipe Lehtonen** from the Employers' Group; **Adam Rogalewski** from the Workers' Group; and **Giuseppe Guerini** from the Diversity Europe Group. (ehp)

*"Draw me...", from The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

**In the time of coronavirus**

By Isabel Caño Aguilar

We are experiencing exceptional and unusual circumstances.

On the one hand, we are isolated in our own countries, our own homes, and on the other hand, we know that the world cannot stop and that civil society keeps getting up every morning and starting work.

This unprecedented situation is placing a heavy emotional burden on all of us. And it's hard to imagine what the consequences of each new day will be. Every aspect of our professional and private lives has been affected.

Firstly, I would like to mention the public services, especially those looking after our health – dedicated professionals who are shouldering their responsibilities, working overtime and putting in every effort to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed and health services from collapsing. Since 15 March, I have joined in the applause from balconies at 8 p.m. every day. In so doing, I am not only helping to show appreciation for this mammoth task, I am also supporting a clear demand: more resources for our public health systems!

In particular, I would like to thank and highlight the efforts of all the healthcare staff at the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at
Granada’s San Cecilio Clinical University Hospital, who shared with us the photo published in this edition of EESCInfo.

To mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, the WHO is celebrating the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife in 2020. These men and women fulfil a crucial role and provide essential services, and continue to do so during the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

They are not the only ones. We sometimes forget an equally vital sector, education, in which I’m proud to have worked. Millions of students across Europe are confined to their homes and would not be able to continue learning without the constant and tireless support of education workers.

Never before has the work of these sectors been so much in the public spotlight and, personally, I think that this recognition should turn into a commitment from the EU to abandon the austerity measures that left them underfunded and instead introduce specific measures and allocate larger budgets.

We won't be able to overcome this crisis without the civil society organisations that are working on the ground every day, but we need decisive action from the EU.

With the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration just days away, now more than ever we need strong impetus and commitment from the EU. The right measures and action need to be taken, including with regard to the budget, so that EU citizens can see that the EU is still an exciting project and not just an acronym.

In these testing times, which will have a lasting effect on our society, we must, above all, be able to convey the idea that another Europe – a stronger and better Europe – is possible.

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**A challenge we shall overcome**

By Milena Angelova

COVID-19 is the biggest challenge we have faced this century. I shall not focus on the negative effects it causes - on our lives, basic rights and freedoms, the economy and wellbeing. Rather I will try to propose a positive and pragmatic view of how to make the most of the current situation. We can deal with this together, if we stay focused, work as a team and be responsible.

**Business More Effective Than Usual**

Our homes are now not only our castles: they are everything for us – office, school, communication centres, entertainment and eating-out venues… This presents a unique opportunity for families to become more united and to benefit from being together and engaging in a team building exercise to ensure that each and every member of the family is comfortably equipped to perform effectively their daily obligations – work, classes, communication, sport. My family, for example, has managed to set up two school rooms (one for each of our two sons), two home offices and a multimedia centre – from where my husband and I attend remote meetings and give interviews to the media – as well as an improvised gym to keep fit even while being locked down. The kids have all their classes online – and even their karate workouts!

**Keeping Spirits High and Capturing Beautiful Moments**

Even though the lockdown encroaches on the basic freedoms of us all – being free to choose where to go, to travel, work and take active relaxation – we still can stay positive and find beautiful moments to enjoy every day. Giving a structure to the day definitely helps us to stay focused and motivated. Personally, I have a very tight schedule, as I have to divide my time between taking care of the kids, finding time for exercise (no compromise – at least 90 mins. of gym a day), working for BICA – we are currently very actively negotiating with the Bulgarian government on anti-crisis measures in support of business and employment – and of course – last but not least – for the EESC. Being able to communicate with all my colleagues only remotely means it takes more time and effort to coordinate and prepare the substance of discussions, and even the simplest tasks are made complicated by the distance. But then it is more rewording and satisfying when success is achieved.

No one knows how long the current situation will continue, or when we will get our normal lives back. But whatever it takes, we will defeat this pandemic together and will be back to our normal, undisturbed lives, free of restrictions and fear. Until then we shall be joining our efforts and continuing to carry out our everyday work and our routines and still enjoy beautiful moments, since even the lockdown is a part of our lives and – if taken in a positive spirit – could offer moments of happiness.

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**Solidarity against coronavirus**

Interview with Giuseppe Guerini

Mr Guerini, how are you coping at this very difficult time?

I am feeling tremendous pressure, both professionally and personally. I live in Bergamo, at the epicentre of the epidemic in Italy and we are being overwhelmed by the suffering here and the sheer number of dead, with worry and a feeling of powerlessness gnawing away at us all the time. We all have friends, colleagues or acquaintances who have either died or who are fighting for their lives in intensive care units.

**As president of an association of cooperatives, how are you coping on the front line?**

As president, I have to deal personally with the many crises that the cooperatives which I represent have been handling since 23 February when we realised that the virus was spreading and we had to make decisions, at a time when nothing was clear, regarding the line to be taken by the many services we manage. Our cooperatives in Bergamo employ over 9000 workers in social and
healthcare services and manage care and home help services, residential and daycare centres for elderly and disabled people. In some cases we decided to close, but were then faced with threats from the local authorities insisting that the services remain operational. The tension was almost unbearable for hours. We then had days and weeks of constantly rising tension and anxiety: the terrible, desperate rush to secure protective gear for our workers, along with worry over having to ensure that certain care and home help services remained operational, despite limited resources and the fear that service providers and recipients might be infected. And unfortunately, that fear was only too justified, particularly in residential facilities for elderly people.

So have the cooperatives continued to operate, or have some of them had to put a halt to their activities?

Well, alongside the difficulties I've just described, we have also had to cope with the fact that one business and activity after another has had to close: first it was schools and other educational establishments, then gradually other sectors. We now have over 180 cooperatives which have had to activate social shock absorbers for around 2500 people and which are now in danger of not being able to start up again. The crisis is having a devastating effect on the tourism and cultural sectors, as well as on agricultural processing and manufacturing cooperatives. As president of an association of cooperatives, I have to cope with a double-edged crisis: people who are overwhelmed because their workload in the sector of home help and essential services has exploded and who are at great risk of infection, and people who are afraid and anxious because they have lost their jobs.

What part of the response to the coronavirus crisis has worked?

What has worked, at least in our case, has been the incredible movement of solidarity and the response of the local communities, volunteer associations and social organisations which have achieved miracles when it comes to collecting donations and doing what has had to be done. Social and healthcare workers have worked selflessly. Doctors and nurses, but also many teachers and carers have kept on working at considerable risk to themselves. Society has also achieved truly impressive feats. In just ten days in Bergamo (and in other cities as well), field hospitals have been set up using fairground tents, with huge numbers of volunteers working night and day for no pay to get them ready. Doctors and nurses from various NGOs have taken on the task of managing many of them, while the costs were covered by donations. In Bergamo again, we set up three hotels with over 300 beds for patients sent out by the hospitals as soon as they are in stable condition so as to free up hospital beds. Our social cooperatives have taken on the duties of caring for patients in these hotels. It has involved a huge amount of work but is a vital service.

What hasn't worked?

The biggest problems are at institutional level: public authorities have been unable to make clear decisions in good time, or to adopt a common approach on planning or acting with regard to the crisis: the local, regional and national authorities have been issuing contradictory decisions. We've been seeing a bureaucracy overly concerned with shoring up its authority and passing the buck to operators. In fact, this has been a problem to varying extents not just in Italy and Bergamo, but in most western countries.

What do you think is the reason for this behaviour on the part of the various tiers of administration?

I think that the situation in China was underestimated, as if people in the west felt that we were above such problems because we have an excellent healthcare system with very advanced technology and very modern hospitals. It's as if too many leaders, along with company directors and individuals were convinced that the western lifestyle and the supposition that we could rely on a high level of hospitals and healthcare facilities would protect us. In the first few days after the epidemic appeared in Lombardy, anyone expressing real concern was laughed at. This feeling of “superiority” is perhaps best expressed in a now infamous comment by an Italian regional president accusing the Chinese of neglecting personal hygiene and eating live mice; this comment reflected a view which was only too widespread in western public opinion. This attitude was still held by other political leaders in Europe and around the world in various ways until just a few days ago. Hospitals which can perform extraordinary and innovative healthcare procedures such as multiple organ transplants and highly advanced cancer therapy have proven to be very fragile, and are on the brink of collapse because of a viral epidemic which could have been contained much more effectively by keeping it as far from hospitals as possible.

Here in Bergamo at least, hospitals have been, despite all their efforts, hotspots for spreading the epidemic.

What is your opinion of the measures taken at European level?

I am with those who feel that at this time the European Union and its institutions have achieved a great deal, albeit with difficulty and inevitable contradictions: from complex decision-making mechanisms to a tendency for the Member States to look only to their own interests. It seems to me that in the course of a month, the European Commission and the European Parliament have taken important decisions and are implementing unprecedented economic measures. What is becoming clear is that however fundamental the economy may be and however important the role played by these economic measures both in dealing with the crisis and in striving to get things going again as soon as the crisis is under control, Europe still lacks the ability to intervene via tools, resources and powers in sectors other than regulating the market and the economy.

So do we need a more united Europe?

It seems clear that we have even greater need of Europe. It's as if one day we woke up seriously ill and someone could only help us by giving us money and the freedom to run off to hospital, but was totally unable to take a direct role in caring for and protecting us. We all know that money is important for healthcare – but if someone gives you money and you're in the middle of a desert, money alone won't save you. I believe that the vast crisis caused by the epidemic is telling us that if we really want a European Union, we have to go much further with the single market and banking and monetary union to have a chance at a union of states which are able to deliver coordinated, unitary continental policies.
How can we all contribute and what sort of help is needed?
We can invest in building up the ideal of a united Europe by promoting the culture of solidarity and integration and trying to stand firm against self-interest and closed doors. It is becoming increasingly obvious that no one can save themselves acting alone and that the dramatic alternative to solidarity and reciprocal and mutual sharing in a community of humankind and Europe will be a degrading and despairing fall towards the hell of more wars.

Have you seen any solidarity towards Italy?
We have experienced considerable solidarity from social networks such as social economy organisations, and friends and institutions from many countries have expressed great concern and support. I have also received precious messages of support from colleagues at the EESC. Regrettably, there have also been some disparaging remarks from European politicians who have lost no time criticising Italy and carrying forward egotistical and obtuse policies not least with regard to the potential role of the European Union. Unfortunately, this is no different from what many Italian politicians are doing, capable only of carping and using this crisis to make political capital and whip up support among a frightened and confused populace. So I would say that even in this situation we have Europe and people who want to help others and stand firm and build, and then we have jackals and opportunists trying to make a profit from crisis and war. (mp)

Coronavirus will change our societies for the better
By Adam Rogalewski
The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) will profoundly change our lives and will also change our countries, economies and societies. It has already made us realise how vulnerable we are despite the enormous improvements in our living conditions over the years, and technological progress, including digitalisation and artificial intelligence. We have also learnt, by staying isolated in our homes, just how important other people and society are to our daily lives. The coronavirus crisis very clearly invalidates the neo-liberal narrative that there is no such thing as society. At times of crisis like the one we are now witnessing, it is society, or in other words, people’s solidarity, that can protect us from the effects of the virus.

The pandemic has changed our perspective on work. We have realised that some workers and professions that were previously perceived as being less important are in fact crucial for the functioning of our economies. These include not just health workers, who are putting their lives at risk and working round the clock to provide care, and care workers looking after the elderly, but also so-called less qualified grocery store workers, drivers, cleaners and agricultural workers, who provide us with essential goods and services. Many of these are migrants who have been perceived as a burden on societies and used as scapegoats in many countries and by many populist parties. Yet we have learnt that, without them, our societies would not be able to tackle the pandemic.

The coronavirus outbreak has eliminated differences between typical, atypical and self-employed workers. We have come to understand that all type of work is essential and all workers, even micro-entrepreneurs, contribute to our economies and equally need state support.

And it is this intervention from the state, which is able to protect workers and entrepreneurs, that plays a key role in tackling the pandemic. More than ever we need a strong and democratically controlled state that can deliver public services and protect the economy. The emphasis should be on a democratically controlled state and its government to avoid a situation like the one in Hungary, where recently adopted measures establishing a state of emergency cannot guarantee that the basic principles of democracy will be upheld. The crisis has also demonstrated the social partners’ essential role in developing policies that tackle the coronavirus outbreak. Sadly, in my own country, MPs seemed to forget this when they recently adopted an act introducing regulations that are not related to the pandemic but that are aimed at restricting the role of social dialogue and the independence of the social partners.

The coronavirus crisis has made the EU more responsive to the public’s needs. For example, the Commission recently proposed an instrument worth EUR 100 billion to support short-term work arrangements and mitigate unemployment risks (SURE). There is, however, a danger that the individual interests of Member States will prevail over EU solidarity. This is of particular importance for the countries with less advanced economies and social safety nets, which will require more economic support.

As shown above, the coronavirus outbreak has allowed us to reassess our societies, economies and the EU institutions, something which otherwise would not have been possible. We have recognised the importance of every worker, even those perceived to be less qualified, the importance of society as opposed to neo-liberal individualistic ideologies, the importance of investing in the public sector and, finally, the crucial role of democracy and social dialogue. I firmly believe that we will not forget the lessons learnt in this crisis and that we will build a better future after coronavirus, a future that makes Europe and the world a better place for everyone.

Irreparable damage to the economy
By Helena De Felipe Lehtonen
In light of the current pandemic, which is affecting us all, but especially those of us who are older or have poorer health, I wonder whether the virus was developed in a laboratory and subsequently released, whether intentionally or not. As ordinary citizens don’t know the answer to that question, and even though a vaccine may be available by autumn 2021, how do we know that another virus won’t appear next winter with similar consequences? (Let’s not forget the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.)

In the face of all these unknowns, is the shutdown of the economy and the extensive use of reserve funds seen in almost all countries the best way to preserve jobs and keep the economy productive? Or should we perhaps put all our logistical and economic efforts into giving our health services the resources they need to analyse and treat infections in people requiring medical care?

I don’t think the world’s economies could remotely handle a similar situation in 2021, either through bailouts or borrowing, as
productive economies will slump, resulting in job losses. Perhaps we will reach a stage where states will have to take control of civil society because no private economy will be able to cope.

People are no longer waiting for the European Union to fulfil its role by demonstrating clear leadership and showing its Member States which path to take in the face of this pandemic in terms of healthcare, the economy and social considerations. Every country has taken its own measures, based solely on the assumptions of the WHO, which of course does not consider the economy. This is another key way to assess the EU’s leadership.

As a member of the European Economic and Social Committee representing European and Spanish SMEs, which have an average of two to three workers each in their productive fabric, I believe that the emotional, economic and personal damage will be irreversible. We should therefore take a short to medium-term view rather than copy health policies from totalitarian countries that are not at all suited to free-market economies.

**EU leaders on COVID-19 crisis**

**Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission**:

We will use all the tools at our disposal to contain the spread of the #coronavirus, help patients and make sure the European economy weatheres the storm.

I’m convinced the EU can withstand the shock to our health care systems and our economies. But each Member State needs to live up to its full responsibility. And the European Union as a whole needs to be determined, coordinated and united.

**Charles Michel, President of the European Council**:

To meet the challenge of #COVID19 we need more Europe, mobilised alongside the Member States to contain the virus spread, guarantee medical equipment and agree on measures to reduce the negative economic and social impact for our citizens.

Full support to health workers working day and night to fight #COVID19 crisis. It will be difficult and take time but we are united in this fight.

**David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament**:

We are in a very delicate moment for our Union and our economy. It is not a time for superficial words. EU institutions are preparing a new package of measures to support countries and people in need. Now is not the moment for unilateral actions but for greater global cooperation.

**Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

Now, we are either a Union or we are nothing. All Member States must come together with a concerted and coherent action. Acting fast and together is the only effective answer to a crisis that affects us all. The European Union’s integrity depends on it.

#Whateverittakess

**Apostolos Tzitzikostas, President of the Committee of the Regions**

The EU must show its unity and help regions and cities fighting the #coronavirus on the frontline. An EU Health Emergency Mechanism must help local communities hire new doctors, buy medical devices and support intensive care services.

I pay tribute to all local/regional leaders on the frontline working with professionalism, dedication and courage in the battle against #COVID19. My thoughts are with those paying a personal price.

**Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank**

The European Central Bank is committed to doing our part to support every citizen of the euro area through this extremely challenging time.

Extraordinary times require extraordinary action. There are no limits to our commitment to the euro. We are determined to use the full potential of our tools, within our mandate.

**Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

The #Coronavirus crisis requires a global answer. Support to partners, in particular Africa, is not only about solidarity and helping the most vulnerable but also in our interest. We cannot solve the pandemic only at home, we need to solve it everywhere. If we don’t, it will bounce back.

The call for an immediate global ceasefire by UN Secretary General António Guterres is more important than ever. Only together and in peace can we overcome the global #coronavirus pandemic. This is the real fight we need to face today. Unity and solidarity are our weapons. (mr)
A call for unprecedented solidarity

On 6 April, ahead of the Eurogroup meeting on 7 April, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted a declaration calling for unprecedented solidarity between Member States and for swift and urgent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing Member States of a community whose fates are intertwined, the EESC stressed the urgent need for joint action in the face of public health issues and the political, economic and social repercussions of the current crisis. EESC members believe that this pandemic could be seen as a test of political, financial, social and scientific solidarity for the European Union. In these highly uncertain times, only a comprehensive European economic recovery plan will enable the EU to rebuild a European economy that is more sustainable and resilient.


Now, we are either a Union or we are nothing. EESC statement on the COVID-19 epidemic

EESC members adopted a statement on 17 March 2020 entitled Now, we are either a Union or we are nothing in response to the situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In it, they call for greater solidarity and joint action at European level to deal effectively with the consequences of the pandemic. Members underline the importance of joint action so that all Member States can come together, support one another and coordinate their actions.

The EESC’s declaration states that No government in Europe or elsewhere can possibly think to solve such a pandemic alone. EESC members - in their capacity as representatives of European civil society - affirm that only a more efficient, more united Europe can cope with the crisis and provide support for Europeans and Member States’ economies.


Coronavirus response: Commission proposal on use of EU Solidarity Fund does not go far enough

On 25 March, the EESC adopted a generally favourable position on the European Commission’s proposal to amend the Council Regulation on the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF) in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

While the EESC’s position paper fully supports the proposed extension of the EUSF’s scope, it considers the resources allocated to the financial instrument to be wholly insufficient and its financial provisions to be inadequate.

EESC president Luca Jahier said: “There is no other alternative but to extend the scope of the EU Solidarity Fund to include major public health emergencies and to define specific operations that are eligible for funding to tackle the pandemic crisis. The amount of resources allocated must, however, be commensurate with the scale of the emergency to be considered effective."

With regard to the eligibility criteria for funding, the EESC proposes lowering the threshold so that countries can protect their citizens from the risk of being affected.

Although the EESC welcomes the increase in advance payments and the Commission’s intention to increase the total level of appropriations for Fund advances, it expresses some reservations concerning these provisions.

“Taking into account the scale of the emergency we face, the proposed level of advance payments will not be enough and the proposed total level of appropriations for advances seems completely inadequate,” said Stefano Palmieri, rapporteur-general for the EESC’s contribution.

More needs to be done so that the response to a public health emergency is rapid and the financial resources to assist countries are mobilised as quickly as possible, says the EESC.

Finally, Member States should consult relevant civil society organisations when preparing applications for the EUSF. (jk)

Coronavirus response: The EESC calls for a larger European investment plan

The EESC backs up the European Commission’s Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative, but calls for a larger investment plan to support the Member States in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initiative is aimed at promoting investment in the healthcare systems of the EU Member States and other sectors of their
Aviation: EESC supports suspension of EU rules on airport slot allocation

The EESC is throwing its support behind the Commission’s proposal to temporarily suspend the EU regulations on airport slot allocation in light of the coronavirus outbreak. The Committee points out that the suspension should apply until the end of the 2020 summer schedule and that this urgent measure should be part of a much wider package to enable the EU aviation sector to recover after the coronavirus crisis.

“The suspension would provide planning stability for airlines. It is highly unrealistic to assume that air carriers could at the present time plan for a resumption of their full summer schedule as of June”, said the EESC president, Luca Jahier. “We must bear in mind that the EU needs to take major steps to support and protect Member States’ economies, businesses and workers to limit the damage done by the coronavirus crisis and support recovery.

Following the exponential spread of the virus and the increasing severity of the measures proposed by governments to contain it, demand for air services is declining very quickly. On 21 March 2020, there were 66% fewer flights than on the same day in 2019. On that particular day, traffic in the major European aviation markets was down 91% in Italy, 76% in Spain, 74% in France, 66% in Germany, 57% in the Netherlands and 59% in the UK. Air carriers have increasingly had to reduce capacity and ground aircraft. In several EU Member States, entire airlines have been grounded.

The EESC takes a firm stand in the position paper adopted on 25 March 2020 and drafted by EESC member Thomas Kropp. “The rapid, sudden and unexpected decline in demand for air services is placing the aviation sector under significant pressure when it comes to maintaining liquidity and this is coupled with the effects of the ongoing uncertainty about the further escalation of the crisis”, said Mr Kropp. “The proposed slot waiver would give airlines planning stability in the coming months and provide them with clear guidance on how to proceed with regard to the summer schedule starting on 29 March 2020”.

News from the Groups

Coronavirus crisis: protect people’s health, save the European economy

By the EESC Employers’ Group

The coronavirus crisis is the greatest challenge that the EU has faced since its creation. It is an extremely difficult time for the EU Member States, companies and citizens. At the same time, the EU has an opportunity to once again prove its worth and meet its obligations by helping the EU countries recover from the resulting economic crisis.

To achieve that, we need extraordinary and unprecedented economic measures and true, unconditioned European solidarity. “This moment calls for strong political leadership and a unanimous act of courage by Europe’s political leaders”, said Stefano Mallia, vice-president of the Employers’ Group. Our citizens and indeed history will judge us by what actions we take or fail to take at this incredibly important moment.

Maintaining jobs is an imperative for the whole of the EU. The more companies survive these tough times, the fewer people will lose their jobs and need help from the state. Employers believe that the European instrument for temporary support (SURE) proposed by the European Commission will be key to mitigating the economic and social effects of the coronavirus pandemic, with the specific aim of protecting jobs and people in work. Member States anticipating extraordinary expenditure due to the introduction of short-time work or similar measures would need to be supported by SURE.

A dedicated coronavirus fund would be the EU’s war chest to provide the maximum financial support to kickstart the European economy once the health emergency is over. All Member States must have equal access to this fund. It should be aimed firstly at preventing businesses from going into bankruptcy and then at helping European companies and the self-employed to bounce back in the shortest time possible.

While Member States do their best to fight the devastating consequences of the spread of coronavirus, these actions should not limit...
the free flow of goods. Protecting the single market is of the utmost importance; we must keep it fully operational and running smoothly. As well as safeguarding the health of their citizens, the Member States must give particular attention to establishing green corridors that allow goods to flow freely through the Union. Once the emergency is over, reviving the single market will have to be a cornerstone of Europe's recovery. (lj)

Labour rights and democracy under attack

By the EESC Workers’ Group

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to escalate across Europe, the Workers’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee is extremely concerned to hear about attacks on collective bargaining and workers’ rights in certain Member States.

We are particularly alarmed by the situation in Poland, where the government is proposing emergency legislation to deal with COVID-19 that will infringe on the independence of the Social Dialogue Council and the autonomy of the social partners.

The Workers’ Group is also aware that in Italy, where the government and the social partners have reached an agreement that unemployment benefits for workers who cannot work during the COVID-19 crisis will be decided by collective bargaining, far-right politicians have called for the suspension of such collective bargaining.

In Hungary, changes endangering workers’ rights have been made to labour law without the prior consultation of social partners. Furthermore, taking the opportunity of the pandemic, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been granted emergency powers that go well beyond the emergency statutes passed in the other EU countries and jeopardise the rule of law and fundamental rights: the emergency powers have no time limit, and will allow him to prosecute anyone who spreads supposed false information, including journalists.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is a major test of our times. While recognising that governments may need to adopt emergency measures to deal with the impacts of the pandemic, the Workers’ Group stresses the need for all governments to respect human and fundamental rights, including workers’ and trade union rights. Now is the time for solidarity and working together. This is the only way that we will defeat this pandemic. (secWGroup)

Trusted media to counter fake news about COVID-19

By the EESC's Diversity Europe Group

Eating garlic, drinking hot water, avoiding ice cream... You might have come across this advice on the internet as ‘tips’ to avoid catching COVID-19. I recently spoke with a friend - I won't mention any names - and she said that it was so frustrating not being able to find real information on the virus.

Trust in the media - that's the big concern. The other day I spent an hour and ten minutes on the phone talking to a farmer, a member of my organisation LTO (Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie, the Dutch Agricultural and Horticultural Association), and I had my work cut out countering all the conspiracy theories he believes in. It was early March.

What I told him was that a lot of the information out there is badly edited material made to raise the number of views - crucial for the writer’s CV - which is then distributed through social media by people looking for confirmation of their prejudices. But of course, the reality around the virus is much more complicated. Then there are also deep fakes.

It is sad to see that even President Trump is himself spreading misinformation while castigating the ‘fake news media’ and his political opponents. At the start of the pandemic he said the virus was a 'hoax'; this was not just ‘misleading’, but an outright lie. Asked on March 12 if he accepted responsibility for the testing problems, he said: “I don't take responsibility at all”. Words that are going to haunt him for the rest of his mandate.

If we learn anything from this crisis, it must be the need for reliable information from trusted media. And there are still many such media, luckily, although they have been hit by budget cuts. People want trusted, independent information and yes, they know where to find it. Hopefully my farmer knows this too by now.

For an impartial journalist the challenge remains of when to pass on the best, most trustworthy information, and when to avoid slipping into government propaganda. I am sure many are grappling with that dilemma. But when some are saying they don’t trust the media anymore and don’t know where to turn for reliable information on COVID-19, they cannot be looking very hard.

Oh yes, my farmer thanked me for taking so much time on the phone. That doesn't happen to him every day, he said.

Klaas Johan Osinga, EESC member

In short

The EESC backs up European Council’s decision to open accession negotiations
The EESC backs up European Council’s decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia

Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and Dilyana Slavova, President of the External Relations Section, issued a joint statement on 26 March welcoming the Council’s decision of 24 March 2020 to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Mr Jahier and Ms Slavova stressed that “During these difficult times for the region, for Europe and the world, it is of crucial importance to send out to the Western Balkans the encouraging and positive message that we stand united and that, in the words of the president of the European Commission, we share the same continent, the same history, the same culture – and that we will share the same destiny too.”

In their statement, they also recalled that the EESC had strongly supported the enlargement of the European Union to the six Western Balkans countries “provided they fulfil all the necessary criteria for membership.”

On the role of civil society in the upcoming accession negotiations, Mr Jahier and Ms Slavova stressed that “the social dialogue and the role of the social partners and civil society organisations in the accession negotiations must be strongly encouraged and promoted, as it is the only way to monitor and ensure respect of core European values, including the rule of law, fundamental human rights, judicial reform, the fight against corruption and discrimination, and freedom of the press.”

The statement concludes by reiterating that the EESC is firmly committed to continuing and strengthening its efforts ‘to be the voice of the civil society and act as a bridge towards EU institutions and their governments.”  (dgf)

Cancellation of YEYS 2020: Europe’s young people will have to wait to make their voice heard

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the 2020 Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS) event, scheduled for Thursday 19 and Friday 20 March, has had to be cancelled. The decision was taken in the interest of everybody’s health and safety, the key priority for the EESC in the context of the current pandemic. The organising team is now considering various alternatives for 2021, although no final decision has been taken so far.

Despite the cancellation of the event as such, participating schools were asked to send a 1-minute video with ideas on how to tackle climate change. The videos were ranked by each delegation and one student from each of the top two delegations will be able to take part in the European Parliament’s Youth Event (EYE), which will be held in autumn.

The school that received most votes is Gimnazija “Svetozar Marković”, from Novi Sad, Serbia, which proposed using landfill gas for energy, thus transforming waste into resources.

The second most voted was sent by the Freiherr-vom-Stein-Gymnasium from Lünen, Germany. German students proposed the “Our Climate, Our Future truck” which produces food using renewable energy and raises awareness about climate change.  (dgf)

The EESC in the media

We have selected for our readers a series of headlines from European media stories featuring the EESC’s response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Austria – Kleine Zeitung - Kleine Zeitung - EWSA-Präsident Jahier “Entweder eine Union - oder nichts”

Belgium - LaLibre.be - "Si le virus arrive ici, il se propagera comme un feu de forêt": les camps de Rohingyas à la merci du coronavirus

Bulgaria – Europost - EESC backs suspension of ‘ghost flights’

Croatia: Hina - Jahier pozvao sve članove EGSO-a na suradnju

Czechia - Hospodářské Noviny - Nejvíce pomohou záruční mechanismy

Italy - Vita - Jahier: “Non dimentichiamo milioni di profughi la loro salute è la nostra salute” / Jahier: “Let’s not forget the millions of refugees: their health is our health”

Malta - Times of Malta - Let’s not forget the refugees - Luca Jahier

Poland – TVN24 - Przedsiębiorcy alarmują. "Obok pandemii koronawirusa będziemy mieli pandemię gospodarczą”

Portugal - Diário do Minho - «Ou somos uma União ou não somos nada»

Spain - Dirigentes Digital - Las discusiones entre gobiernos retrasan la respuesta común de la UE (ab)
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