The Grassroots View - Episode 8 : "When the world of work comes tumbling down"

When COVID-19 struck Europe, it not only brought hospitals to the verge of collapse but created havoc in its wake on many different fronts: European GDP slumped, industrial production plummeted and thousands lost their jobs. The future does not look rosy either. In episode 8 - "When the world of work comes tumbling down - we look at what the EU could do on the employment front, where it has only limited powers. We spoke to Professor Caroline de la Porte from the Copenhagen Business School, who gave us a brief overview of the employment guidelines, a tool that enables the EU to help coordinate Member States' employment policies. EESC member Ellen Nygren told us about the EESC's proposal on how the employment guidelines should be revised in the light of the COVID-19 crisis so as to make sure that the Member States, among other things, give help to self-employed Europeans - such as the Portuguese musician, Tiago Rodrigues. He shared with us his story of how he and his 5EX Band became jobless overnight.

Dessine - moi... (Draw me...)

Our "Draw me..." section is becoming radiant with colour, gathering more and more shades of emotion, thoughts and observations on life and the passage of time. The testimony of EESC members proves that this long and difficult period of crisis is leaving its mark on our memories. We are very grateful to those who have shared their thoughts on this time of crisis with our readers.


All these articles are available by clicking on the following link:
https://www.eesc.europa.eu/news-media/eesc-info/082020#a80501

Available Languages:
bg cs da de el en es et fi fr de hr hu it lt lv li nl pl pt ro sk si sv

Editorial

CIVIL SOLIDARITY PRIZE - AN AWARD FOR THE BEST AMONG US

Dear readers,

It’s that time of the year again, and the EESC should be launching its trademark Civil Society Prize to reward outstanding projects by civil society and individuals that have promoted our common European values and reinforced our European identity. Each year we pick an important theme for the prize and celebrate the achievements of civil society in that particular field of its work. In 2019, we crowned the winners of the 11th Civil Society Prize competition, having looked for champions of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

But 2020 is not an ordinary year and we decided that it demands an extraordinary prize. For 2020 will go down in history as one of the most trying periods in our recent past. When COVID-19 struck Europe, it caught us unprepared, wreaking havoc in its wake on many different fronts. Costing thousands their lives or seriously affecting their health, it has pushed health systems to the verge of collapse. It forced countries to impose lockdowns, dealing terrible blows to their economies and societies. Thousands of Europeans have been left jobless and many more will follow, with material deprivation or even poverty for many looming on the horizon. Many companies, especially smaller and medium-sized ones have had to shut their doors because of globally-imposed shutdowns. Many civil society organisations are seeing their space further shrinking as a result of quarantine and distancing measures or are struggling to survive as they see or will see their funding cut.

Like any other ordeal, the crisis caused by the coronavirus outbreak has brought out not only the worst, but also the best in
people. Many individuals and organisations have mobilised to help those most affected by the crisis or have made huge efforts to assist the most vulnerable among us. Others have launched various projects aimed at mitigating the consequences of the pandemic. All have shown that solidarity is key in surmounting the crisis awaiting Europe on a scale which has not been seen since the Second World War.

Since the start of the pandemic, the EESC has focused all of its activities on COVID-19 and on finding ways to overcome its devastating effects. Apart from their work at our Committee, EESC members have undertaken initiatives on the ground through their respective national organisations. To demonstrate their commitment to tackling the coronavirus crisis, we have created a special section on our webpage, “Civil Society Against COVID-19”, which brings together over 50 of their stories.

The fact that we are dedicating our flagship annual prize to the fight against coronavirus should therefore come as no surprise. We have even changed its name for this purpose and I am proud to say that in 2020 we are launching a special, unique version in the history of our prize – the Civil Solidarity Prize. Through this prize, we want to highlight the engagement, the willingness to act and the work accomplished by Europe’s civil society and many individuals against the coronavirus and its consequences. We want to highlight the unprecedented solidarity shown by many in these difficult times, we want to pay tribute to the courage of people and of civil society organisations, to their actions and their unbelievable sense of responsibility.

The Civil Solidarity Prize will be awarded to not-for-profit projects carried out by individuals, civil society organisations and companies in the territory of the EU and the United Kingdom. Instead of the usual five, this year we decided to reward 29 winners - one from each Member State, one from the United Kingdom and one with a cross-border or European focus. Despite the fact that the UK is leaving the EU, we did not want to leave the former Member State out of our contest. With this gesture, the EESC wants to show that it does not intend to break ties with UK civil society but that – on the contrary – it would very much like to maintain close relations.

We think we will put together a magnificent picture of everything civil society has accomplished during these long months.

For we are in this together. Let's stick together, let's show solidarity, generosity and responsibility. It is the latter qualities that we will seek in the prospective winners of our unique award.

Isabel Caño Aguilar

EESC Vice-President for Communication

Diary Dates

28 August 2020, Brussels, Belgium
Public hearing
Best practices in diversity management and the future of EU diversity policies for migrants and ethnic minorities

8 September 2020, Brussels, Belgium
Public hearing
The rule of law and its impact on economic growth

15-16 July 2020, Brussels, Belgium
EESC plenary session

Dessine - moi...

Evangelia Kekeleki: "Ensure that all Member States have equal access to vaccine therapies and diagnostic tests"

I didn't find it particularly difficult to stay at home during the lockdown. There were a number of things I’d been putting off doing for years. So I had the chance to get down to them and was glad to be able to sort them out. The family photos and mementoes that I’d collected from our parents’ houses were all mixed up, so I sorted through them. Putting them in order like this was very emotional. I kept myself busy with activities I’d missed, such as handicrafts, baking, cooking, making traditional Greek liqueurs, jams and preserves - things I don’t normally have the time for when I’m trying to keep up with the hectic demands of my job.

On the other hand, I have to say that I really missed the children because they don't live with us. Our younger son would pass by beneath the balcony so we could see each other from a distance, which was hard and brought home how much we were missing out on. I stayed in touch online with my son in England. But we felt the need to contact each other, even though only online, more often
I have the feeling that we gradually began to remember some of the values we had forgotten, such as showing solidarity, saying hello to the people who live next door but who we would forget to greet, smiling from the balcony to someone passing by on the street below. With the pandemic, feelings we had actually forgotten about resurfaced. We had forgotten to feel gratitude. We had been taking our health for granted. In 2020, we could never have imagined that a virus would do so much harm, that it would take loved ones away from us, that in a neighbouring country there would be such a high death rate, so many human lives lost. It all makes you think a bit differently, take a closer look at your basic life values.

The pandemic has thankfully also made us realise the overriding importance of science in our lives. We need to start a discussion to see which countries have been the most affected and why, looking into the role of populism and conspiracy theories, not to mention the anti-vaccination movement, in these countries. The acceptance of and trust in science on the part of politicians and the public has protected some countries, such as Greece. I think we also need to start a discussion about the role of the church, the media and prominent public figures during the pandemic.

It is very significant that in all countries the value of national health systems emerged, since more recently, in the wake of globalisation and society's emphasis on ways of generating wealth, we have woken up to the fact that some services cannot be delivered under a profits-based approach. We had neglected national health systems and came to understand how they need to operate, not just in the event of a pandemic, but always. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those who were on the front line in spite of all the difficulties facing national health systems.

I would like to add a few words on the subject of consumers. Unfortunately in many Member States, due to the pandemic, there was a deterioration in standards of consumer protection, especially for passengers/travellers. Although the relevant EU Commissioner issued a recommendation to Member States not to suspend legislation protecting consumers in respect of flights, package tours and transport, many Member States unfortunately went ahead with the suspension. So instead of being able to get our money back when we cancel tickets, they are giving us vouchers - valid for 12 to 18 months - which are not even guaranteed in the event of the company going bankrupt. If we do not use the vouchers within the time limit, then we will be able to get our money back. This amounts to interest-free borrowing on the part of the travel companies at the expense of consumers, who have also been affected by the pandemic. I know of people who do not need their vouchers as there is no way they will be using them in the next 12 to 18 months (e.g. school trips for children who finish secondary school this year). And yet for 12 to 18 months, the parents of these children will have provided an interest-free loan to anyone involved in organising these trips. It is unacceptable for consumer rights to be curtailed.

Moreover, as we are living in a digital era and have all been working from home, making much more use of the Internet, there have been many more cases of online fraud, as well as far more widespread dissemination of fake news, including alleged conspiracies. What we do need, on the other hand, is to ensure that workers continue to enjoy their acquired rights when teleworking. One issue worth looking into is how teleworkers' performance is calculated, how it should be assessed, and in any event we need to examine working relations under teleworking conditions.

Another very important parameter that the EESC has started to use - one for which the EESC president, Luca Jahier, has already voiced his support on Twitter - is the proposal by the Greek prime minister calling for joint procurement on the part of the Member States of vaccines, therapeutics, medicines and diagnostic tests, so that no Member State is left without supplies that are vital for human life.

This is an initiative that needs to be taken up by the EESC as a whole, in the form of an own-initiative opinion, in order to be absolutely certain that all Member States have equal access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. I would like to say that it gave me great pleasure to present this proposal both to our president, Luca Jahier, and to the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), and both agreed to support it.

Tellervo Kylä-Harakka-Ruonala: "From the Winter War to poetry"

It was the 80th anniversary of the end of the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland. The national commemoration was cancelled due to coronavirus, but bells were ringing at 11 a.m. in all Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic churches across the country. I went outdoors to listen to their chimes and saw Helsinki almost desolate.

The Winter War lasted 105 days - and so did my self-isolation, which began on its anniversary. Even though I enjoy my own company, isolation was sometimes tough. I then asked myself: my parents coped with the appalling conditions of the war, my father fighting on the front at 30 degrees below zero and my mother at home alone with a new-born baby, what do I have to complain about? Actually I was lucky, as I was able to go out at any time. And I made use of this opportunity by walking hundreds of kilometres - mainly along the coast.

My background organisation followed the situation in enterprises very closely and provided the government with proposals on how to save businesses and jobs. The short-term outlook was very gloomy, and the future is still blurry. But when company leaders began to plan the necessary measures to enable a responsible exit, a new hope started to emerge.

Together with colleagues, I prepared the proposals of the EESC's Employers' Group on tackling the coronavirus crisis: how to help European businesses survive and retain jobs, and how to boost the recovery of the EU economy. Thanks to digital tools, my work at the EESC continued almost normally despite the exceptional conditions. It was nice to see my library soon become one of the meeting points for my colleagues from all over the EU.
The lockdown also brought me something new at a personal level. I had the honour of becoming a remote muse and receiving poems – each more delightful than the last. I would like to share one of them with you to illustrate the spirit of encouragement and support that I hope we can all offer to each other:

I don’t offer a weekday, I offer Sunday.
I don’t offer everyday chores, subjects of big efforts.
I offer Sunday, with its high sky that carries over the everyday life.

(freely translated from Finnish to English)

Sofia Björnsson: "Farmer solidarity in Sweden"

I work for the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), and at the beginning of the pandemic we worked very hard to secure food supply.

At LRF we have a scheme for farmers in need. If a farmer falls ill, there are groups that can help take care of animals or deal with other practicalities during their illness. The scheme was quickly set up back in March.

LRF has also been helping businesses match job-seekers and farmers short of labour – for example, a vegetable producer offered to employ people from a nearby hotel that had closed, and there are many other examples. Thanks to initiatives like these, and the fact that many seasonal workers from other countries could come to Sweden, the farming and forestry sectors, which initially were short of staff, have now more or less secured the workforce they need.

Many farms, especially vegetable producers, have had to change crops this year, and forest producers have had to postpone certain activities. However, overall the agricultural sector (including horticulture) seems to have been less severely affected in Sweden than in many other European countries.

However, our organisation feels strongly that we need to extend our solidarity beyond the farming world, and one very practical thing we were able to do to help was donate plastic sheets from overhead projectors in our Stockholm office to make protective visors for health workers.

Personally, I feel very fortunate. No one close to me has fallen ill with COVID-19.

I can work from home just as well as I do from the office. I can hear some neighbours arguing in my building, and that makes me think about those who are less fortunate in this lockdown – people who have lost their jobs, children who have not been to school and have not had a school lunch for a long time, families living in small apartments with hardly any room to work or do homework.

But I miss my family, especially my parents, who are elderly. I miss doing ordinary things like meeting many people at the same time.

And of course I miss the office and my colleagues.

In spite of all the pain, loss and disruption, I believe COVID-19 is teaching us lessons. Above all, I think it is teaching us to come to terms with uncertainty. We are very used to being able to plan our lives, but the pandemic, especially at the beginning, has forced us to change our habits. Now we have developed new habits, but we do not know how long this period of uncertainty will last.

When it's over, the first thing I want to do is meet my parents and in-laws. I have seen my parents for a socially distanced picnic in a park, but I am looking forward to spending time with them in real life, like in the good old days.

Irini Pari: "The crisis has shown us yet again that our futures are interconnected"

As I am writing this testimony, the gates of lockdown are timidly opening up and questions are starting to arise: what kind of world are we stepping into? What marks or scars will this epidemic leave on our economies, our societies and our lives? Have we learned anything? Will we do things differently?

As a Greek, seeing my country enter a new crisis just when Greece was starting to come out of a ten-year-long nightmare, I was distressed and felt it was an injustice. We had to face this new pandemic with a weakened healthcare system and economy due to the previous crisis. Today, I am proud to say that Greece handled the first phase swiftly, realistically and successfully. Everywhere there was solidarity and a sense of common purpose.

As representatives of enterprises, our first concern was saving lives. Businesses mobilised very fast and made important donations for the purchase of medical and clinical equipment. At the same time we had to organise work from a distance and keep workers safe in the workplace, examine measures to save companies and jobs, ease liquidity, keep the value chains in place and get organised for the next phase.

Decisions were taken by our government, but we knew that no one could face this asymmetric shock alone. Europe was more relevant than ever! Europe responded - "a bit late" some will say - but it did, and we can be proud as Europeans. I think this is, yet again, the first lesson to draw from this crisis: our futures are interconnected.

The second lesson, I believe, is that we must not abandon our efforts once the coronavirus threat is behind us, but must move on with European integration, especially given the developments between China and the USA. We need to continue along the path that we planned and designed during the previous crisis to achieve a deeper economic, financial, fiscal, green, social and political Europe. I am confident that this time we will persist in our efforts.
Thirdly, before this pandemic, I was always astonished by how much our societies underestimated, undervalued and underinvested in two essential areas of life: health and education. We are living with the consequences of this - people losing their lives and populism on the rise. It is therefore even more important today to create a stronger Europe in terms of health and education.

On a more personal note, during this crisis I had the time to read some philosophy and I would like to share with you a beautiful notion. Ancient Greeks believed in the "cosmos living in harmony". This was based on two values: αιδώς, respect for others and for all the elements - vegetal, animal and human - of our world, and δίκη, justice. Let's get inspired by this concept and create this "cosmos" for ourselves!

**Tatjana Babrauskienė: "If this quarantine has done anything, it's given people time to recharge and think about how important our relationships are"**

Tatjana Babrauskienė is a Lithuanian member of the EESC and of the Lithuanian Education and Science Trade Union. EESC Info has asked her to share her thoughts on COVID-19 as seen from her country.

**How have you experienced the lockdown?**

It has been a unique experience, involving a great deal of anxiety and waves of panic as headlines talked about a virus that was spreading globally like wildfire.

At the same time, it was like living in slow motion in a world where everything had changed overnight, leaving us with a new normal.

My organisation was flooded with emails from members and teachers who felt lost and needed support. We created a COVID-19 information webpage with recommendations, legal advice and other useful information, and a "Distance learning ideas" page with tips and tools for e-teaching and e-learning.

All this kept us energised because we knew that many people relied and depended on us.

**What did you miss during this difficult time?**

Meeting with friends and colleagues and most of all with loved ones.

Take Easter, for instance. Traditionally, we spend Easter with our extended family. This year we painted eggs and cooked special dishes as usual, but there was no festive mood in our celebrations.

Thankfully, we were allowed to leave home for a walk or exercise, alone or with family members, and I used this opportunity widely.

**What lessons can be learned from the lockdown?**

During the quarantine we created new practices as we gravitated online. We will see whether they will become a regular way of working and communicating, and if the frequency and duration of our meetings with co-workers and friends will change.

The lockdown has also partly been an educational experiment, testing how students perform with online teaching versus face-to-face classes. Unfortunately, it has also increased inequality, and it remains to be seen whether schools can return to the status quo after this crisis.

The digital shift has been shown to involve a risk of age discrimination, the spread of conspiracy theories and the growth of fake news as people try to find answers to the important questions: what is going on here, who is responsible and what are the reasons for it? On the other hand, technology today makes it possible to monitor everyone all the time. How could this impact our personal life? We should not be put in a position of having to choose between privacy and health.

The good news of the lockdown is that the halt to human activity is making a difference to climate change and that cutting carbon emissions and changing people's attitudes could become more of a reality.

**What hope is there for those whose jobs are threatened?**

Workers have been unevenly affected by the lockdown. Those whose jobs were nonessential and/or couldn't be performed from home faced the largest income losses and lost the most jobs.

Job insecurity and pay are correlated with education levels, so we need to reinforce our education and training systems and provide the necessary up-skilling and re-skilling for everyone in need. We must ensure that we come out of this crisis stronger and better prepared for the future, whatever it might be.

**Are there any people you would like to see but haven't been able to yet?**

My foreign friends and colleagues. I can't wait to meet them and work with them without worrying about masks, social distancing and hand sanitisers.

Lithuania has done a terrific job in not just flattening the curve, but downright squashing it. Our social life is back to (almost) normal. But in some countries the situation does not look so stable. I do hope things will get better soon for them.

If this quarantine has done anything, it's given people time to recharge and think about how important our relationships are.

**Reet Teder: "It's good to be back"**

When the crisis started in the middle of March, the whole situation was truly unique and unbelievable. Almost everything was closed everywhere in Europe and nobody knew at that time if the lockdown was actually helping or not. Saving lives was the most important thing and the economy had to be sacrificed.
We saw Europe's four freedoms disappear overnight. The Single Market was almost gone. We saw one Member State block deliveries to another and buyers literally waiting outside face-mask factories in China to outbid one another.

In my country, Estonia, the situation was not too bad. The health system was able to cope, and not too many lives were lost to COVID-19 (69 altogether). At first, there was a shortage of masks and other protective equipment, but this was ultimately resolved. It was good to see how quickly some companies changed their production and started to manufacture the necessary equipment, while others helped with deliveries.

My family and I managed quite well. Living in our own house with a garden in a green area, we did not suffer too much. Of course, almost everything - shopping centres, schools, cinemas, theatres and sports facilities - was closed, but walking outside (keeping a distance!) was possible and even recommended.

It was remarkable to see the real boost of e-everything - from shopping to seminars to communication. Everything was suddenly done via the internet - including schooling. Overnight, teaching and learning went online. And the teachers and children did well. Everyone learned a lot during the crisis and it was so heartwarming to see how much my daughter missed real school.

At work, the legal team of my organisation, the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, provided a record number of consultations during this time. Acknowledgement of force majeure reached an all-time high. The economic situation is slowly improving, but some sectors are still facing great difficulties. I am afraid that this could be only the beginning and that in autumn, things may get worse. For the moment, government measures are helping a lot of people, but what will happen if these come to an end?

Difficult times like this make one think about and appreciate the lives we live and our freedom, in Europe and also at the Committee. It is indeed a real luxury to be able to travel, come to Brussels and have our debates. It is very important that we continue our work, so as to maintain a real link between different people in different EU countries, with or without crises.

Peter Schmidt: "We need to shift towards an economy of wellbeing"

German trade unionist Peter Schmidt gives us an insight into the challenges faced by trade unions in his country amid furloughs and dismissals on the one hand and essential workers putting their safety on the line on the other.

How are you experiencing this coronavirus crisis?
I have the feeling that we are living in surreal times and discovering how vulnerable our societies and economies are.

What has this crisis meant for you and your organisation?
For me as a trade unionist it is essential that we come together and communicate with one another. Freedom of association is a core element of our democracy. We are seeing how important this right is and realising that we will have to fight to preserve it in the future.

In some cases, where we had excellent relations with employers, we found ways to keep the social dialogue alive and we struck some very good win-win agreements. But in other cases both the workers and the companies lost out.

How did you experience the lockdown?
The most striking thing for me was to see so much social solidarity between neighbours and friends. I was also struck by how the pace of society slowed down.

What did you miss most during this difficult time?
Meeting friends and family, going to restaurants.

What lessons can be learned from the lockdown?
That the most important people in our society are nurses, shop assistants, rubbish collectors, caretakers and so on, and yet that they have the lowest salaries. The virus has exposed our economic weakness, which is why we need a shift towards an economy of wellbeing.

What hope is there for those whose jobs are threatened?
That the Member States have learned their lessons and will support them for much longer than their contracts cover them for.

Who are the first people you want to see when this is over?
My mother. She is in a rest home that is still locked down.

Kinga Joó: "Families have the ability to strengthen society's immune system"

On 10 March the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee meeting in Brussels took place in a strange, heavy atmosphere. After the meeting everyone was in a hurry to get back on the road. I returned home knowing that major changes were about to hit Europe and with the feeling that this would be my last flight for a long time. In Hungary, during this period people's main reactions were uncertainty and disbelief. For many Hungarians the severity of the situation became clear when the government announced that the celebrations planned for 15 March, our national day, would be cancelled.
In his address to the nation on March 15, the president of Cyprus announced preventive measures putting the country and large parts of the economy under lockdown. The message was that severe economic hardship was imminent and we all had to brace ourselves for the impact.

In the face of this unprecedented crisis, the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB) responded by suspending all non-essential services and focusing its resources and human capital on helping the government and businesses protect public health and the economy.

We put OEB into overdrive, establishing the federation from day one as the contact point for businesses. A Mon.-Sun. hotline was introduced offering guidance to businesses and we issued more than 175 circulars in real time, providing information and answering questions about healthcare protocols and the business support schemes put in place.

We also made 67 radio and 192 television appearances, of which 52 were on primetime news. In the same 4-month period, our executive committee convened 27 times (it usually sits about 10 times a year) and met 11 of our 14 cabinet ministers.
The business community rallied behind OEB’s efforts, offering valuable insight into the problems the economy was facing. We are proud to say that we were directly involved in the framing of the national response strategy, our proposals forming a considerable part of the national COVID-19 exit plan.

This pandemic has been hard on everyone, most of all the tragic loss of human life. It has affected our interpersonal relationships, employment and the way we conduct business. We have been moved by the solidarity people and businesses have demonstrated, as well as by how well they complied with the restrictions imposed.

Although a force of destruction, COVID-19 has taught us a lot. We have learned that the state and the private sector can work together effectively in perilous times. We have learned that decisive intervention based on solid scientific evidence can bring positive results. We have also learned to think differently and adapt how we work, foregrounding the importance of a digital economy.

Unfortunately, this crisis will not leave our economy unscathed. But from what we have experienced so far, if we show the same resolve and decisiveness in the months ahead, we can put this crisis behind us with fewer losses than there might have been and return to normality sooner rather than later.

**Gunta Anča: "A crisis is a fantastic opportunity to spot the weakest links"**

Lockdown was a strange time of self-understanding. On the one hand, it was like a dream come true... to stay at home and have enough time to do all those things I'd always wanted to do, but didn't have time for. On the other, it made you realise how important socialisation is for people - to meet, talk, touch, see other human beings in reality and not on a screen. And how hard it is to live without all that.

This experience changes your values and makes you think in a different way. But it also shows new ways of working together. It is possible that after this crisis we will have more online meetings, which are much easier, but at the same time do not really allow us to create new ideas together and develop new forms of cooperation.

There are and will be many lessons for our society. I wouldn't be able to mention all of them, so maybe I will highlight just few in the field I know best - people with disabilities.

This crisis has shown how bad the situation is in long-term care centres. Many people with disabilities and many elderly people just died there and some countries did not even include these deaths in their coronavirus statistics. Five years ago, our Committee drew up an opinion on the deinstitutionalisation of care. There have been some changes since, but the crisis has shown how much we still have to do.

At the same time, we have been talking so much about support systems for the most vulnerable groups in society, but the crisis has shown that, despite all the support measures, people with disabilities were one of the first groups to lose their jobs.

A crisis is a fantastic opportunity to spot the weakest links in our support systems and now is the time to do our best to make them stronger.

The role of civil society organisations during this crisis has been and will continue to be very important, as they are the closest to all members of society. People from different groups need to be supported and civil society organisations are the best place for them to find that support.

These organisations are also best placed to know what kind of help people need, so it is incredibly important to involve them in the decision-making process.

As our experience in the field of disability has shown, there have been a great many different approaches. Some countries have included organisations of people with disabilities in governmental decision-making bodies (Italy), and some have given them the opportunity to express their views at a very high level (Spain), but in some others these organisations have just been forgotten (Latvia). And this reveals how much importance the governments of the different European countries attach to their different citizens.

**Cristian Pîrvulescu: "The confinement period? More work, more stress, less rest"**

How was the two-month lockdown in Bucharest? Strange! On 15 March, Romania took its first measures. From 18 March, everyone had to stay at home. Before 15 March, this was only a recommendation, which few people followed, increasing the epidemiological risks. The mandatory lockdown lasted until 15 May, when the state of emergency was replaced by a state of alert. But this was no holiday! On the contrary, I worked harder, working online for more than 12 hours, and sometimes 16 hours a day: classes and activities on the university’s platform, and taking part in TV programmes, interviews, meetings and webinars.

The lines between public and private life became blurred and the boundary between the two worlds quite simply disappeared. Moreover, things did not become easier at the end of this two-month period. Life has not gone back to normal and, as well as my online activity, I have other obligations requiring a physical presence. So my schedule has remained just as packed.
Even though I wasn't one of those who were permanently isolated in their own homes – I had limited freedom of movement in Bucharest – my ability to travel was considerably reduced. That was the hardest thing to bear during this period. This is perhaps why, symbolically, the first thing I did when the state of emergency ended on 15 May was to make an appointment to renew my passport. However, the successive steps to ease the lockdown have not fully restored freedom of movement.

Travelling abroad – for example to Brussels for EESC meetings – remains difficult and can be a risky business. Flights are cancelled from one day to the next and it is hard to predict what will happen. Life has changed, neither for better nor for worse, but it has certainly become different. And we will have to adapt. For a while anyway. And, once again, the most vulnerable will be the first to suffer.

**EESC News**

**EESC to award Civil Solidarity Prize to projects fighting coronavirus in each Member State and the UK**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has launched a Civil Solidarity Prize to reward initiatives undertaken by individuals, civil society organisations and privately owned companies in the EU and the United Kingdom to battle COVID-19 and cushion its devastating blows.

The EESC will be awarding up to 29 prizes of **EUR 10 000 each**. 27 prizes are available for projects implemented in Member States, one for a UK entry and one for a project with a cross-border or European focus.

The Civil Solidarity Prize, designed as a one-off award replacing the EESC's trademark Civil Society Prize, will honour initiatives that have made an outstanding contribution to tackling the COVID-19 emergency and its manifold consequences, and have thereby strengthened European solidarity.

With this prize, the EESC wants to pay tribute to all those people who fought against the coronavirus, displaying courage, commitment, and an unbelievable sense of responsibility.

To be eligible to apply, entrants must either reside in or be established in the EU or in the UK. Despite the fact that the UK is now leaving the EU, by including candidates from this former Member State among those eligible for the prize, the EESC wants to show that it does not intend to break ties with civil society in this former Member State and that – on the contrary – it wishes to maintain close relations.

**The deadline for entries is 12 p.m. on 30 September 2020.** The award ceremony will take place at the EESC plenary session in January 2021 in Brussels.

More information on how to apply available [here](#).

**Expectations are running high as Germany assumes the EU presidency**

On 1 July, Germany picked up the baton from Croatia at the helm of the Council of the EU in what will probably be its most challenging presidency so far, with Europe facing the biggest economic, social and health crisis in its modern history.

Germany, who will hold the Presidency for the 13th time since the signing of the Treaties of Rome in 1957, has already announced that its programme will focus directly on overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and on shaping the EU's economic recovery as well as on reinforcing Europe's social cohesion.

The priorities of its presidency - whose motto will be "Together for Europe's recovery" - were presented at the EESC plenary by German Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, Peter Altmaier.

The German minister told the plenary that "We all realise that we can only really effectively fight this pandemic by working together. We can only hope to be successful if the EU and its Member States stick together, if we show solidarity towards the weaker, if we refuse to allow ourselves to be divided. This is why dealing with this crisis is our key priority. We want to ensure that there will be real solidarity for our citizens and that they can see it and feel it for themselves."

The quick adoption of a revamped and ambitious Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the Next Generation Recovery Plan proposed by the Commission to respond to the social and economic fallout of the pandemic would be the first step in this direction, Mr Altmaier said.
Apart from the negotiations on the MFF, Germany is expected to deliver on other pressing issues too, such as climate protection and the European Green Deal, digital transformation, the rule of law and Europe's role in the world. The EU's future relationship with the United Kingdom should also be determined during the German mandate.

The EESC is ready to contribute to the work of the German presidency and to ensure the voice of Europe's civil society is heard during these most dramatic and crucial times for Europe and its future.

"The EESC is ready to join forces to help shape and implement the Next Generation EU recovery plan to lead us out of this devastating crisis while strengthening the European project. We remain committed to the work of the German presidency, leading a Europe that heals and protects together and relaunching a solidarity-based, entrepreneurial and sustainable Europe for a new re\U{n}aissance," the EESC president Luca Jahier declared.

The EESC has already been asked by the German presidency to produce 10 opinions on topics including the platform economy, sustainable supply chains and decent work in international trade, non-profit social enterprises and their potential for a socially equitable Europe, digitalisation and sustainability, and many others.

The EESC voiced its satisfaction with the fact that one of the priorities of Germany's presidency is to reach an agreement on the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which the EESC is expect to play a strategic and pivotal role.

You can find out more about the EESC's cooperation with the German presidency in the newly published brochure. (II)

---

**EESC contribution to the European Commission 2021 work programme – A first step towards a more sustainable and fair society**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a Resolution on its contribution to the European Commission's 2021 work programme at its July plenary session. The document welcomes the proposals made by the European Commission to overcome the COVID-19 crisis and sees the next year as an opportunity to restructure and improve the EU’s economy and society.

The resolution adopted by the EESC welcomes and fully supports the Next Generation EU plan and the overall EU budget for 2021-2027 proposed by the European Commission and expresses the hope that this will be "fully and concretely extended" in the Commission's work programme for 2021.

The Committee has formulated its specific proposals for the 2021 work programme along the lines of the Commission's main priorities.

For EESC members, the work programme should focus on "restructuring and improving our economy and society" and be based on the following principles: "protecting human and social rights, democratic values and the rule of law; unlocking the full potential of the Single Market; achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); creating a circular economy and achieving climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 at the latest; and ensuring good governance and democratic accountability." (dgf)

---

**EESC discusses migration with Commissioner for Promoting the European Way of Life**

At its July plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a debate with Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, who presented a number of upcoming initiatives falling under his portfolio of "Promoting our European Way of Life", including the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Skills Agenda, the EU for Health Programme and the new Security Union Strategy.

Migration policy dominated the debate.

"We are awaiting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum with great hope but also concern. I hope that it will lead to substantial reform of the Dublin system, which has been a black hole in EU policy for all too long," the EESC president Luca Jahier told Commissioner Schinas.

Mr Jahier said it was in the field of migration and integration that the values of solidarity, equality and fairness, or the lack of them, were especially visible. He deplored the situation where Member States in Southern Europe have to carry a disproportionate burden while some countries opt out of their obligations.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, announced as the number one priority for the Von der Leyen Commission, had to be delayed due to the pandemic. It has now been postponed until after the negotiations on the strengthened EU long-term budget.

Commissioner Schinas said the New Pact would provide a holistic solution, which would among other things combine robust management of external borders and shared management of asylum applications, splitting the burden equally among all Member States.

In the exchange of views with the commissioner, EESC members pointed to the importance of full social and economic inclusion of migrants and to the need to emphasise their contribution to our societies and economies. (II/ks)

---

**EESC President Luca Jahier pledges Commissioner Gentiloni his full support for Commission's COVID-19 recovery package on eve of EU summit**

...
President Jahier criticised the EU Council’s recent proposal to give national governments the power to veto a country’s reform programmes under the package. In a debate with economy Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni at the EESC plenary, Mr Jahier said the whole Committee stood behind the European Commission.

Mr Jahier said the Commission had risen to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, first with early measures taken to waive budget deficit and State aid rules and later with the proposed Next Generation EU package, mobilising some EUR 5 trillion – roughly equivalent to five times the Marshall Plan – to counter the massive consequences of the pandemic.

“We want you to know that the whole EESC is with you, the Commission and the Parliament, in this battle to reach a good agreement – an agreement that is up to the challenge, that does not dangerously backtrack and above all does not suffer setbacks which could throw Europe into devastating social turmoil after the summer,” Mr Jahier told Commissioner Gentiloni.

Mr Gentiloni underlined that COVID-19 had had a huge economic and social impact and generated the biggest economic shock since the Great Depression. “The resilience of our societies and our values will remain our main line of defence against the virus and the crisis. It is crucial to ensure a strong recovery from the crisis.”

He went on to say that “The absence of economic and social convergence between EU states and regions is a threat to the political sustainability of the European project. To ensure a sustainable economic recovery and to be resilient to future shocks and strengthen convergence in the EU we need significant investment and reforms now more than ever.”

Mr Jahier reiterated the strong criticism he had made in an earlier statement of the counterproposals recently put forward by Council President Charles Michel to make the package acceptable to the heads of state and government, in particular the MFF budget cut and the governance of the package.

Although very small in absolute terms, the proposed reduction in the overall 2020-2024 EU multiannual budget from the EUR 1 100 bn of the Commission’s May 2020 proposal to EUR 1 074.3 bn would be the first ever cut in real terms to the EU budget. It would affect EU core funds for helping countries and regions that are lagging behind. Above all, Mr Jahier stressed, it would become the starting point for negotiations over the future MFF, taking the EU budget for structural action down a dangerous road of ever-shrinking ambition.

The EESC was even more critical of the proposal to split the governance of the package between the Commission (MFF) and national governments (Next Generation EU). This would mean moving from integrated management giving the Commission leverage on a reinforced budget, to a budget that is fragmented at least to two parts.

More worrying still, said Mr Jahier, was last night’s proposal to give individual countries a last-resort veto by convening an extraordinary meeting of the EU finance ministers if they object to a Member State’s proposed reforms under the package. This, he said, would mark a definitive, structural split in the European budget which would be dangerous and unacceptable.

One other burning issue that the EESC assembly was keen to discuss with Commissioner Gentiloni was yesterday’s Court of Justice ruling annulling a 2016 European decision which would have forced Ireland to claim back EUR 13 billion in back taxes from Apple.

The EESC backed the Commission’s efforts to get Big Tech to pay more tax and thus correct a flagrant injustice. Mr Jahier also expressed appreciation for the proposals presented by the Commission the day before to put an end to improper and unsustainable tax competition between Member States.

Asked about progress on the taxation of the digital economy, Mr Gentiloni outlined the state of play of negotiations to reach a global or, failing that, EU-wide agreement that would provide the EU with much needed own resources.

“I want to be very clear”, said Mr Gentiloni. “There are no easy solutions because of political, technical, international problems. But there is something very positive: we have a growing demand from public opinion, from the European Parliament, from your Committee and from stakeholders. And we have an opportunity from the fact that Member States see the need for the Commission to have stronger own resources to repay this common debt.”

He concluded: “Yes, we do indeed need to have stronger own resources to make a success of this Next Generation EU. Because the experience of our Union shows that this is an absolutely extraordinary initiative. It is not something permanent, but if it works, if it gives good investments, if it helps modernise our economy, and if we are able to increase own resources to repay this debt, I assure you that, as always in the EU, this will be a precedent to build upon in the future, when there is another crisis or a new common goal to reach.” (dm)

Coronavirus response: EESC calls for swift approval of EU recovery plan

The EU must do more for the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and do it quickly, showing solidarity and an ambitious vision for the future of Europe. In three opinions adopted at the July plenary session and a position paper, the Committee throws its support behind and calls for the swift approval of the recovery proposals put forward by the European Commission, including the revised 2021-2027 EU budget.

In particular, in order to revive the European economy as soon as possible, the opinion drafted by Petru Sorin Dandea, Tommaso Di Fazio and Petr Zahradník backs the Commission’s Next Generation EU initiative, as a specific tool for prompt and effective action. With reference to cohesion policy, the EESC supports the Commission’s REACT-EU initiative and, in the position paper put together by Antonello Pezzini, recommends eliminating all possible and unnecessary administrative barriers and burdens, in both national and European public administrations, and immediately pre-financing the Member States with at least 70% of the resources for the year 2020.

With a view to supporting the green and digital transitions, the opinion drafted by Dimitris Dimitriadis backs the Commission’s proposals to promote the EU’s economic, social and territorial cohesion in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis by providing direct large-scale financial support to Member States for public investment and reforms. Finally, in the opinion by Ronny Lannoo, the EESC welcomes the proposed strengthening of the InvestEU programme and the creation of the complementary Solvency Support Instrument to help companies in the recovery stage. (mp)
Europe needs the political courage of Robert Schuman

70 years on, Robert Schuman’s declaration reminds us that it takes political courage and vision to make a difference and change the course of history.

A ceremony paying tribute to this founding father of a united Europe took place on 7 July at the EESC, on the initiative of its Secretary General, Gianluca Brunetti, with the participation of EESC President Luca Jahier, Jean Quatremer, a European affairs specialist and correspondent for the French daily Libération, and Pierre Kroll, a cartoonist for the Belgian newspaper Le Soir.

According to Jean Quatremer, if Robert Schuman were to repeat his appeal today, he would focus his project on the need for solidarity between poor and wealthy countries and on European values.

Actors Aurélie Vauthrin and Rachid Benbouchta gave a reading of the declaration, reinterpreted for the modern age.

EESC launches "Civil society against COVID-19" web pages

"Civil society against COVID-19" is the new dedicated section of the EESC website which brings together over fifty stories of recovery, solidarity and practical action during the coronavirus outbreak. Launched on 2 July 2020, it features initiatives of EESC members, through their local organisations in the Member States, to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

Isabel Caño Aguilar, EESC vice-president for communication, initiated the project: "The EESC has closely followed the development of the pandemic, expressing strong solidarity with the victims of coronavirus and their families. What we are now doing is showing our members' daily commitment on the ground to take action to deal with the consequences".

She encourages people to visit the new section of the website: "This website is dedicated to the work that the EESC, its members and the civil society organisations it represents have been doing to get through the crisis and prepare for the future. In our hospitals, our countries, our cities and rural areas, unnamed men and women have been working tirelessly together to overcome this crisis. It is important to highlight that organised civil society is a key player in the fight against the pandemic and the recovery from it".

The EESC members' stories are wide-ranging, encompassing workers, businesses and social dialogue, as well as agriculture, health, transport, the environment, consumers, equal rights, young people, families and the elderly. (mp)

Machinery Directive: improve it but don't change it, says EESC

At its June plenary session, the EESC adopted an information report on the revision of the Machinery Directive. EESC members welcomed the Commission’s current efforts to improve the performance of Directive 2006/42/EC, which is a very important and successful instrument for European industry, while noting that radical changes to the directive would have a deeply negative impact and must be avoided.

"The basic approach and the architecture of the directive must remain unchanged", argued Aurel Laurenţiu Plosceanu, rapporteur for the report. "We have also recommended that the Commission consider the chronic understaffing, underfunding and poor performance of machinery inspections and controls in most of the Member States. We call on them to move from words to action," he concluded.

The co-rapporteur, Enrico Gibellieri, said that the directive was important for the single market as it ensured the safety of components: "We need to make sure that we are protecting consumer interests, we need to be able to improve this machinery continuously to make sure that there is ever better protection for workers".

To update the Machinery Directive, the DG for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs launched a public consultation in June 2019. The legislation is scheduled for adoption during first quarter of 2021. (ks)

The EESC proposes creating an extraordinary fund to support the agricultural sector in response to the COVID-19 outbreak

The EESC welcomes the new measure proposed by the European Commission to support farms and agri-food SMEs that are experiencing liquidity problems and to ensure their economic survival during this crisis. However, the EESC believes that the European Commission should establish an extraordinary fund to implement it.

The European Commission’s proposal to finance this measure is limited to making targeted amendments to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) regulation in order to enable national authorities to allocate up to 1% of the 2014-2020 budget to this new measure and thus use this unspent money for these extraordinary needs.
According to the rapporteur for the opinion, Arnold Puech D’Alissac, this proposal poses two significant problems: “The first is that some of the Member States have already used up or committed their funds under the EAFRD and cannot therefore use this relief mechanism. The second and most important problem is that the money that was supposed to be used to make agriculture more competitive and improve the environment will now be spent on addressing these urgent cash flow needs.”

The EESC therefore believes that the European Commission should create an extraordinary fund, outside of the common agricultural policy budget, to allow for the proposed measure to be implemented, like the recovery plan. (mr)

News from the Groups

EESC Employers send letter to European Council: Business is key to EU recovery from corona crisis

by the EESC Employers’ Group

Given the extreme urgency of tackling the economic effects of the coronavirus crisis, the Employers’ Group has called for swift and ambitious measures in a letter sent to all European heads of state and government. Only through cooperation between the Member States can the recovery and reconstruction measures contribute to the long-term success of the EU, including its people and businesses.

The letter has called for a quick and forward-looking agreement on the recovery budget. This was seen as especially important after the meeting of the European Council on 19 June, which showed considerable disagreement between the Member States. The letter was also sent to European Council president Charles Michel, Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and the president of the European Parliament, David Sassoli.

The EESC Employers’ Group Position Paper Business is key to the EU’s recovery from the corona crisis accompanied the letter to the members of the European Council. It outlines measures that need to be taken to save and recover businesses and jobs. A major part of the EU economy is engaged in crisis management and EU businesses will fall further into difficulty if not properly supported, e.g. by granting short-term support (liquidity), strengthening the internal market, avoiding severe disruptions to the level playing field and ensuring Europe’s global competitiveness.

Businesses that manage to recover well and succeed are key to the recovery of the EU economy. The agreement on the recovery fund is the fast decision the EESC Employers’ Group overall called for. The Recovery Package funds must now reach our companies and SMEs as quickly as possible and without red tape. It is only through private enterprise that we can kick start our economy. (kr)

The EU at a crossroads: the German presidency and the recovery and reconstruction of Europe

By the Workers’ Group

Germany has taken over the presidency of the EU Council at a crucial moment for Europe, with our union standing at a crossroads. We are facing the most brutal crisis experienced in peacetime in the last 90 years, with more than a hundred thousand deaths in Europe alone and massive economic shocks, not to mention the uncertainty of more waves of the pandemic to come. During the tough months of lockdown, healthcare workers, but also people working in deliveries, supermarkets and sanitation - jobs that are often precarious and underpaid - have borne the brunt of the effort to keep our countries running.

‘Together for Europe’ is a motto we can all rally behind, but its principles of sustainability, fairness, security, common values and innovation must be pushed forward. Concrete initiatives under the European Pillar of Social Rights - such as a European Minimum Wage, the implementation of equal pay for equal work, the posting of workers and transparent working conditions - are more necessary than ever.

Instead of the austerity measures of the last crisis, which led us into a downward spiral of debt and stagnation and starved our healthcare system of resources (the price of which we now are paying for in lives), Europe needs to provide robust, common measures for a recovery and reconstruction plan, both in the short and long term. We are facing a 15% GDP depression, and business as usual is no longer an option. As the crisis deepens, the Member States are not evenly equipped to deal with it, and a lack of a
coordinated European response may lead to social and economic collapse, jeopardising the very existence of the EU.

The size of the task ahead for the German presidency is gargantuan, but so too are the risks of failure if the recovery plans keep being stalled in the Council, rendered useless by national vetoes on every last euro or turned into the Troika-like ‘rescues’ that damaged the EU a decade ago, leaving it in the unprepared state in which it finds itself now. As the president of the Workers’ Group said: “The stronger the recovery measures are and the more they are tailored to the situation of the Member States and their populations, the more credible Europe will be and the more capable of rising to the unprecedented challenges we face in this crisis. It is therefore a matter of social justice and solidarity, but it is also a bulwark against any drifts towards authoritarianism that inequalities and social divides may encourage in EU countries once the health emergency has been tamed”.

Civil Society Organisations Helping Refugees and Migrants in Europe

By the EESC Diversity Europe Group

On 22 June, the EESC’s Diversity Europe Group organised a conference entitled Civil Society Organisations Helping Refugees and Migrants in Europe, combining remote and in-person attendance.

The event sought to illustrate the pivotal role played by civil society organisations and the daily challenges they face in helping refugees and migrants. The conference also strove to refocus political attention on the issue and offer a forum for discussion between civil society and the EU institutions, particularly as part of the EU’s post-COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction.

In the first panel, civil society organisations from four countries (Greece, Italy, Czechia and Sweden) were invited to present their practical experiences in helping refugees and migrants travel across Europe upon their arrival and integrate into EU Member States.

In the second panel, Michael Shotter, Director at DG Migration and Home Affairs, and Erik Marquardt, member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (Greens/EFA, Germany), represented the European Commission and the European Parliament respectively. Bureau member Rossella Nicoletti (EUROCITIES) represented the European Migration Forum.

Pavel Trantina, vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group, summarised the first panel’s discussions, emphasising the challenges facing these organisations in their daily work, including a lack of respect towards refugees and the organisations helping them, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient educational and psychological support, a lack of clear guidelines from Member States and excessive bureaucracy. A lack of funding together with smuggling networks at borders were also among the main obstacles facing civil society organisations.

Séamus Boland, president-elect of the Diversity Europe Group, closed the conference, stressing the high human cost of migrants trying to reach Europe and the importance of social cohesion, respect for their dignity and solidarity with them.

The president-elect stated that the Diversity Europe Group would continue its work on this subject and would cooperate with the EU institutions and Member States to address the issues raised by the civil society organisations active in this field.

For more information, please see the web page of the event. (jk)