EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

October 2022 | GA



The Grassroots View - S3 Episode 21 – The Organic Awards and the state of organic food in Europe

In this episode we explore organic farming, production and eating through the lens of the first EU Organic Awards. These were handed out in September 2022 to eight European organisations excelling all along the organic food chain: from Best Organic Farm and Region, to best Organic SME and Restaurant. What are the prospects of reaching the EU target of 25% of agricultural land under organic farming by 2030? Does organic food contribute to food security and food affordability in times of energy and price crisis? If so, how? These are some of the questions we tackle with our guests **Peter Schmidt** (EESC), **Alexander Wugk** (Lilla Bjers), **Michel Pâque** (Ferme à l'Arbre), **Jörg Daunke** (J. Kinski), **Eddy Wax** (POLITICO Europe). (tk)

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Dear readers,

I would like to use this platform to flag up two forthcoming EESC initiatives, which will address the biggest issues the world is facing today: the climate emergency and the war in Ukraine.

The annual meeting of the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27)** will take place in Sharm El-Sheikh, in Egypt, from 6 to 18 November. The stakes couldn't be higher, as extreme weather events, long predicted by climate change models causing huge destruction and tremendous suffering the world over, have increased the urgency. This week, as world leaders are getting ready to meet and try once again to reach a deal that can bring the world back from the brink of climate catastrophe, the EESC will be voting on a resolution addressed to them. The resolution calls for brave decisions on the key issues on the table: climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage and increased ambitious action. It recognises that all sectors have a part to play. At the EESC, we have developed strong positions on all these elements in recent years. The voice of social partners and civil society organisations is loud and clear.
It is essential that we recognise the climate emergency as a matter of urgency. The impacts of climate change affect society, citizens, the economy, social stability – this is not just an environmental issue, it is an existential threat. I encourage you and your organisations to help relay the message of our resolution, so that the voice of European civil society carries as far as Sharm el-Sheikh.

Then, on 24-25 November, the EESC will host a triple debate in Zagreb, Croatia on the **war in Ukraine and its impact on the EU**, raising three crucial questions: How will the war and Ukraine's new candidate status affect EU enlargement and prospects for long-standing candidates? What will its repercussions be for Europe's energy choices and path towards carbon neutrality amid soaring energy prices, which are wreaking economic havoc and testing the strength of our countries' green resolve? Communication is playing a key role in this war: who is winning and what is new on that front, and how is Europe coping with yet another wave of disinformation coming its way?

This year, distinguished experts and opinion-makers will also be sharing their insights and debating with civil society organisations that are grappling with the fallout from the war, whether as employers running up huge energy bills that threaten their businesses, workers struggling to heat their homes and make ends meet, or activists welcoming the huge influx of refugees. Your organisation is very likely to be grappling with these problems too, so you may want to join the event online. You are very welcome to take part in the conversation and help keep the culture of constructive dialogue and fact-checked information alive in these dark times, when both are coming under threat.

So, watch this space!

Cillian Lohan
EESC Vice-President for Communication

DIARY DATES

26-27 October 2022, Brussels

EESC plenary session

6-18 November 2022, Sharm El-Sheikh

The EESC at COP 27

24-25 November 2022, Zagreb

Connecting EU Seminar: "Geopolitical turmoil at Europe's door: the perspective of civil society" (more info below)

TO THE POINT

Under this heading, we invite members of the Committee to draw attention to topics that are of particular interest to them, that are at the heart of their activities. For the third time since 2017, the European Parliament is organising a European Gender Equality Week from 24 to 30 October. This topic is a priority for the EU as a whole, and especially for the Committee, which advocates for equal rights.

Maria Nikolopoulou, president of the EESC Equality Group, points out the elements that link the two institutions, how the Committee wants to get involved in this project, what issues need most attention, and what concrete actions will be implemented in the EESC during the Gender Equality Week.



MARIA NIKOLOPOULOU: EUROPEAN GENDER EQUALITY WEEK IN THE EESC

For the second year running, the EESC is liaising with the European Parliament and replicating the European Gender Equality Week initiative. The idea is to include a gender perspective in debates as part of our regular work.

The EESC has decided to organise a number of events during the October and November meetings of its sections and consultative committee on industrial change (CCMI). In addition, at its October plenary, which will take place during Gender Equality Week, the EESC will be holding a debate with MEP and European Parliament Vice-President **Evelyn Regner** , who is responsible for this project at the Parliament.

The EESC has embraced this initiative and I hope we can keep it running for as long as is necessary in order to raise awareness of the fact that, even though we are progressing towards effective equality between men and women, progress is neither fast enough nor consolidated. Our society is openly against inequality, discrimination and violence against women. Consciously and publicly, women's rights are being defended and respected by the majority. But unfortunately, certain attitudes and discourses are so deeply ingrained that some people unconsciously fall into the trap and perpetuate them, while others do it on purpose so as to block social change.

The remits of the EESC sections give us an opportunity to highlight the position of women in a variety of contexts, from the most male-dominated ones to the ones where women are most represented. Gender equality is not a "women's thing". It is a precondition for building fair, resilient and prosperous societies. That is why it is important for women and men to walk down this road together, hand in hand, demonstrating mutual respect and support.

Maria Nikolopoulou, EESC member and President of the Equality Group

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IMAGINE UKRAINE...

In this column, we publish photos showing the war in Ukraine and its aftermath. It is often journalists who provide such evidence because they are the ones who go where we cannot to record events and save them from oblivion.

This photo was taken, selected and commented on by **Jowita Kiwnik Pargana**, a Polish journalist and EU correspondent, author of numerous reports from Ukraine.

While I'm choosing this photo, the Russians are dropping rockets onto Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. As Putin takes revenge for the blast on the Crimean Bridge, this photo has become sadly topical. That night the sirens began to howl at 2 a.m. Oleksiy Kolomyets, a biathlete and USSR-era champion who ran with the Olympic torch at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, woke up his family. They ran down to a shelter that Oleksiy had arranged in the basement of his house. Here he brought down carpets, blankets, duvets, sleeping bags and a supply of food, and hid weapons under a mattress. Oleksiy's wife, Lyudmila, and her grandson fell asleep snuggled on the sofa. Oleksiy kept vigil on the floor. After an hour, the alarm was called off. In the morning the sirens wailed again so, as too often in recent days, they ate breakfast in the basement. After 24 February, bomb shelters became an everyday reality for Ukrainians. Many metro stations, and hospital, theatre and school basements were turned into shelters. Some Ukrainians, like Oleksiy, make shelters in the basements of their homes.

Jowita Kiwnik Pargana, Polish journalist, correspondent for Deutsche Welle in Brussels, author of numerous reports from occupied Ukraine.



"ONE QUESTION TO..."

In the section "One question to...", EESC members are invited to explain why a proposed opinion is important for European legislation from the point of view of organised civil society. This time we spoke to Tomasz Wróblewski, the author of the opinion on Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).

EESC: *You are the rapporteur for opinion SOC/734 "Initiative against abusive litigation targeting journalists and rights defenders". The unusual abbreviation SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) refers to strategic lawsuits against public participation in democratic debate. SLAPPs are detrimental to freedom of expression, in particular to investigative journalists, as they lead to judicial intimidation and harassment. To*

counter this, the European Commission is proposing an EU directive on strategic lawsuits against public participation. What is the EESC's assessment of this proposal and what would ensure its effectiveness?



TOMASZ WROBLEWSKI: WHAT ARE SLAPPS AND HOW CAN THEY BE DEFENDED AGAINST?

Freedom of expression and freedom of public debate are at the heart of modern democracies. The ability to provide information, express opinions and present views is crucial for the development of an informed civil society. These core values guide action to prevent strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).

The use of legal and judicial institutions to harass and intimidate journalists, social activists, human rights defenders, whistleblowers and ordinary citizens engaging in public affairs has been increasing in recent years. The EESC therefore welcomes the Commission's initiative to provide adequate tools to defend against the instrumentalisation of justice, which limits the flow of information and the opportunity to present opinions and views.

The mechanisms proposed by the Commission are highly appropriate, but to comprehensively address the problem it is worth considering extending their list. As the envisaged directive is of a cross-border nature, there is a need for simultaneous action by individual countries to review existing legal measures and to implement national solutions that provide appropriate protection against SLAPPs also at that level.

At the same time, we must not forget the extremely important issue of appropriate education. Awareness of the threat posed by SLAPPs and the possibilities for defence offered by the directive and national legislation should be raised both among legal professionals and also participants in the public debate.

Tomasz Wróblewski is a member of the EESC

NEW PUBLICATIONS



The Surprise Guest

In the Surprise Guest column, readers will find opinions and commentary from people whose attitudes, actions and engagement command public interest. In this edition, we are publishing an article by Jowita Kiwnik-Pargana, a Polish journalist and European Union correspondent.

Jowita Kiwnik-Pargana has worked for the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza and the Polish Press Agency and completed studies at the Polish School of Reportage. She has been an accredited correspondent to the European Union for several years and works at the Polish office of Deutsche Welle in Brussels. She has written many articles on social issues, culture and international affairs. Since February 2022 she has been travelling regularly to Ukraine to document the events related to the war and report on the lives of Ukrainians.



Jowita Kiwnik-Pargana: "My Ukrainian heroes"

It started with the border. Shortly after the war in Ukraine began, I went to the border crossing point, not to work yet, but to bring humanitarian aid. At that time, a stream of people, mainly women and children, was flowing across the border, all the plans they had made becoming obsolete from one day to the next.

I met women who managed to pack all their belongings into one backpack and walked dozens of kilometres to the border, pushing children in strollers. They left their husbands and sons in their country and didn't know where they would sleep at night or who might take them in.

I went to Ukraine soon after, this time as a journalist, to show how the war has been transforming human lives.

I heard the story of Inna from Mariupol, who hid in a basement for three weeks and saw the bodies of her neighbours lying on the street but couldn't bury them because shells were still falling all around.

Petro, also from Mariupol, told me how he looked for drinking water in the bends of cast iron radiators.

And 82-year-old Halina, who was left alone during the war, said "I saw an old woman. I went up to her, she was crying. I told her: 'don't cry, wherever you're going, I'll go. I won't leave you'".

I remember the Ukrainian children who spoke about what the war was to them. Five-year-old Alisa, who knew that people were being killed during the war. And 12-year-old Zhenia, who said with conviction that Putin was not a president but a dictator.

I learned the story of a girl whose surrogate mother left her right after she was born and whose biological parents never came forward.

The list of heroes from my report is long, behind each name is another story marked by the war. It's not easy to listen to these stories, but in times like these you need to keep your nerves in check.

This is not the time for our emotions, we're not here to cry with our heroes, but to listen to their stories. The time for tears comes later, after work, at home.

Ukrainians are keen to speak. They want to talk about the atrocities perpetrated by the Russians, they want to defeat Russian disinformation, which says that Ukrainians are lying about attacks and murdering themselves.

Our purpose as journalists is to let the world hear about what is really happening in Ukraine.

EESC NEWS



EESC debate hails priority given to SMEs in forthcoming EU measures

A debate on challenges and prospects for SMEs in the EU hosted by the EESC welcomed the measures announced in the State of the Union address and discussed EESC proposals to make business transfers easier amid concern over their growing number.

The EESC plenary on 22 September included a debate on the topic "**SMEs in Europe – challenges and perspectives**". The debate featured **David Clarinval**, Belgian Minister for SMEs, **Isabelle Schömann**, Confederal Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, and **Véronique Willems,** Secretary-General of SMEunited, and also presented an EESC report on business transfers in the EU.

Mr Clarinval painted a mixed picture of the situation faced by Belgian SMEs, with their strengths – digitalisation, innovation, access to finance – and weaknesses – shortage of skilled labour, automatic salary indexation, late payments. "The single market is fundamental for these businesses," he said. "It's not always perfect, however, and even now responses to energy issues could remain at national level in many cases." He then described the measures put in place by the Belgian authorities to help companies face the energy crisis, with an emphasis on payment flexibility schemes.

Ms Schömann conceded that it was all well and good to support SMEs through these harsh times, revising State aid rules and competition policy. It was fine to invest in education, upskilling and reskilling to help companies face the green and digital transitions, but it would be wrong for businesses and SMEs to look at the social dimension of the twin transition only through the lens of skills. Likewise with the recent crises, "It is not acceptable for businesses, be they big or small, to have access to public money without any conditions. There need to be social conditions to maintain employment – quality employment," she argued, "which also includes the effective exercise of democracy in the workplace through informing and consulting workers. Anticipating change is not an issue for businesses alone. Companies need to tackle this together

with workers if everyone is to buy into the measures that are put in place."

Ms Willems hailed the new measures announced in the Commission President's State of the Union address, particularly revenue caps for electricity producers and the relief package for SMEs in need, above all the Late Payment Directive, for "it is simply not fair that one in four bankruptcies are due to invoices not being paid on time. The Commission has launched many initiatives in this term of office which will impact SMEs. However, we wouldn't call it an enabling legal framework just yet," she said, pointing to what her organisation sees as the missing elements, particularly the need to make the SME test more effective and ease the regulatory burden: "the one-in, one-out approach doesn't cut it. We have to work with a one-in, more-out approach," she underlined. (dm)



The EESC calls for the introduction of a European Youth Test for all future legislation

During its September plenary, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion on the EU Youth Test. For years, young people have demanded that their voices be heard in decision-making processes. With this opinion, the EESC becomes the first EU body to support their call for a mechanism to assess the impact of future legislation on youth.

The Committee argues that to achieve a long-lasting impact and leave a legacy beyond the European Year of Youth, young people need to be involved in policy-making.

"Young people are calling for the EU Youth Test" said the EESC rapporteur of the opinion, **Katrīna Leitāne.** "To make regulations and policies better, an EU Youth Test should be introduced: an impact analysis tool designed to ensure no negative impact of any policies is foreseen on youth and future generations by meaningfully engaging with young people and proposing mitigation measures."

The EESC acknowledges the reference to the EU Youth Test in the European Commission's Communication on the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, it emphasises that the Commission's proposal falls short of the original proposal's goals, lacks meaningful engagement with youth organisations and experts and fails to take youth into account systematically in all policies to consider the long-term impact of policies on future generations.

The EESC also calls for greater interinstitutional cooperation in aligning existing successful initiatives such as the EU Youth Dialogue, Your Europe, Your Say! and the European Youth Event. In addition, the Committee outlines a list of proposals to foster youth participation within the EESC itself and will consider ways to incorporate the EU Youth Test concept into its work. (gb)



A climate adjustment fund to ensure a swift response to crises

In an own-initiative opinion, the EESC proposes creating a climate adjustment fund (CAF) to ensure a rapid response to new climate and energy crises. The CAF would complement existing EU policies and ensure a more effective use of existing funding.

For example, while it has provided impressive support to Member States since 2002, the EU Solidarity Fund, with its EUR 500 million annual budget, could not cover the costs of the damage caused by natural disasters in 2021. Flooding in western Europe alone cost an estimated EUR 38 billion.

Rapporteur **Ioannis Vardakastanis** said: "our vision for a CAF is to ensure a strong funding mechanism using existing EU funds to respond quickly to emergencies and help rebuild damaged communities. It is a very ambitious way to rebuild and protect areas affected by pressing climate, energy and environmental crises".

In addition, the current energy crisis was not on the radar when the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework budget for 2021 to 2027 and the NextGenerationEU recovery plan were drawn up. The CAF would address the need for urgent investment in alternative energy sources more effectively than the existing mechanisms. This is especially relevant now, with many people unable to pay their gas or electricity bills.

"We are not adequately prepared to respond to emergencies and disasters due to climate change and the energy crisis, either in terms of volume of funds or of timeliness", says **Judith Vorbach**, co-rapporteur for the opinion. "The establishment of a climate adjustment fund would be an important tool to fix that". (tk)



The EU needs to put the spotlight on social sustainability

In an own-initiative opinion adopted in September, the EESC has asked the Commission to describe the provisions required to extend the EU sustainability taxonomy to social objectives. The Commission is mandated by the Taxonomy Regulation to publish a related report, but has so far failed to do so.

"The EESC calls for a holistic EU taxonomy, which includes environmental as well as social sustainability. A social taxonomy would help to channel investment towards social goals", said rapporteur **Judith Vorbach**. "It should constitute a gold standard, reflecting a higher level of ambition than provided for in legislation".

The EU taxonomy is a classification system establishing a list of environmentally sustainable economic activities for scaling up sustainable investment in support of the European Green Deal.

The EESC is of the opinion that a social taxonomy would help tackle bogus claims by businesses that want to attract socially responsible investors by providing accurate information about their social footprint. The Committee believes that a smartly framed social taxonomy can go a long way towards avoiding so-called 'social washing'.

Kęstutis Kupšys, member of the study group, stressed that the financial industry was eager to discuss social taxonomy. "There is a demand for sustainable financial products in the market, including for social sustainability" he said. "Unless we get a clear classification on what is considered 'social', we will miss this aspect in the area of sustainable investments." (tk)



Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law: time to move from recommendations to action

On 26 September the EESC held a conference on the European Commission's latest Rule of Law Report to discuss ways to ensure that the recommendations made in the report would result in tangible improvements in Member States.

The European Commission's 2022 Report on the Rule of Law for the first time ever entails country-specific recommendations concerning justice, corruption, media, and checks and balances. Progress has been uneven in the Union, and serious concerns remain in a number of Member States.

"The EU should always use all its tools – including budget – to address any new attack on democracy, the rule of law or human rights, as soon as they emerge, and wherever they happen" said EESC president **Christa Schweng**, opening the conference.

The European Commissioner for Justice, **Didier Reynders**, explained that "This year has shown again that anchoring a strong rule-of-law culture in the EU is fundamental. As we work together to help Ukraine defend its sovereignty and integrity, we can only remain credible if we protect the rule of law inside the European Union as well."

The conference was also an opportunity to present the second synthesis report from the EESC's Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group (FRRL), providing an overview of the country visits organised by the FRRL group to Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Spain, Cyprus and Lithuania in 2020 and 2021. **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, President of the FRRL Group, explained that "While democratic systems in the countries visited have generally shown a good level of resilience, the need for safeguards and effective checks and balances, including the role of watchdog played by civil society, has been clearer than ever."

In her closing remarks, **Edita Hrdá**, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to the EU, emphasised the importance of civil society: "Civil society is capable of bringing life to human rights. Promoting the Rule of Law is an ever-lasting task that requires not only our cooperation, but also constant vigilance." (gb)



EU Organic Awards 2022: from Germany, Belgium and Sweden the best SME, food retailer and restaurant

On 23 September, the European Economic and Social Committee announced its winners in the first ever EU Organic Awards, co-organised with the European Commission and other partners to reward excellence along the European organic value chain.

The winners were:

- For best organic food-processing SME: **Goodvenience.bio GmbH** – Magdala, Thuringia, Germany
- For best organic food retailer: **La ferme à l'arbre de Liège** – Lantin, Liège, Belgium
- For best organic restaurant: **Lilla Bjers HB** – Visby, Gotland Island, Sweden

The winners of all categories were announced during a special ceremony held at the European Commission to mark EU Organic Day and hosted by the EU Commissioner for Agriculture, **Janusz Wojciechowski.**

EESC president **Christa Schweng** said: ''The EESC has led the way for years in advocating for a more sustainable and comprehensive food policy in the EU. We are therefore very proud to be a co-organiser of these awards, contributing to raising awareness of the organic sector's potential to help achieve more sustainable food systems''.

"The winners today showcased how they work in their everyday life to make the transition to more sustainable and fairer food systems a reality" said **Peter Schmidt**, president of the EESC's Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) section.

The awards were launched as part of a commitment made in the Commission's action plan for the development of organic production to recognise excellence along the organic food chain, from farmer to restaurant. (ks)



Deploying carbon removal technologies in industry is key to achieving Green Deal goals

In its September plenary, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion on the EU industry decarbonisation technologies.

The adoption of the EU Climate Law has set an ambitious emission reduction target for 2030, and confirmed the climate neutrality objective for 2050. Meeting these goals would require carbon dioxide removal (CDR) technologies to be deployed. The less rapid and stringent the greenhouse gas emissions reductions are, the stronger the dependence on CDR for meeting the targets of the Paris Agreement.

''Decarbonisation will require a deep transformation of industrial activities within a time depth of 30 years'', said **Andrés Barceló Delgado**, rapporteur for the opinion. ''Although many low-carbon technologies already exist, their progress is still low. We will need ambitious technology roadmaps to upscale and widely deploy these breakthrough technologies, and the EU must promote innovation through the climate and innovation funds'', he added.

Depending on when CDR is deployed, it can serve two different purposes: i) accelerate achieving net-zero emissions by compensating for those from harder-to-abate sectors, and thus increasing the likelihood of staying within the temperature thresholds; or ii) bring global warming below the thresholds following a temperature peak above them (an overshoot).

''Development of technologies, together with education and reskilling of the workforce, is vital for the green transition in the manufacturing industry. Social dialogue at both European, Member State and regional level should support awareness and acceptance of, and support for, a green and just transition in the industry. Capacity building and projects to define key skills will be essential in order to ensure an effective industrial transition that leaves no one behind'', said co-rapporteur for the opinion, **Monika Sitárová**. (ks)



Energy: the EESC warns against creating new dependencies

In a recent opinion, the EESC has backed the European Commission's REPowerEU Plan to wean the EU off Russian gas and oil, but has pointed out that many of the problems now being addressed as a matter of urgency could have been avoided or curbed by reducing dependency on energy imports a long time ago and completing the energy market, as urged by the EESC for years.

In the opinion adopted at the September plenary session and drafted by **Stefan Back, Thomas Kattnig** and **Lutz Ribbe**, the Committee stressed that the combined economic and social effects of the current crisis will put the EU's democratic system under strain unless adequate solutions are found. Immediate measures must be implemented to ensure security of supply at a cost that is "as affordable as possible" for both consumers and industry, which are affected by the current price crisis, lest social unrest starts to arise.

The EESC said that the REPowerEU Plan is a step in the right direction but warned that these emergency measures must not lead to new dependencies and should not harm the efforts to achieve climate neutrality as soon as possible.

The Commission should develop a geopolitical energy import strategy which takes into account urgent energy and climate issues, before concluding partnerships with non-democratic or politically unstable countries.

According to the Committee, the urgent need to secure supplies requires flexibility regarding the temporary use of fossil and low emission fuels. (mp)



The EU needs more public investment in energy infrastructure to fight climate change

The EU needs to address the climate crisis through a threefold approach: mobilising funding, engaging citizens and the private sector, and exerting strong political leadership. This was the message conveyed by an EESC own-initiative opinion adopted at the September plenary.

The opinion, drafted by **Thomas Kattnig** and **Lutz Ribbe**, argues that to meet increasing demand for electricity and achieve the climate objectives, the EU must invest more in smart and renewable energy systems and storage infrastructure, and that everybody must play their part.

According to the federation of the European electricity industry, Eurelectric, the EU must double investment in the electricity grid to EUR 55 billion per year and increase the budget for building clean generation capacity to EUR 75 billion per year.

"We need massive public investment in order to meet the energy transition and climate goals. This is essential to ensure security of supply, tackle energy poverty, keep prices affordable and create jobs," said **Mr Kattnig**.

The EESC supports the Commission's intention to improve the design of the electricity market, and is strongly in favour of market assessments to analyse the behaviour of all potential players. "In order to design a well-functioning energy market, it is key for the Commission to assess the advantages and disadvantages of public and private ownership and/or private financing of energy infrastructure," said **Mr Ribbe**.

To finance infrastructure investment, the EESC recommends skimming the windfall profits of energy companies and applying a "golden rule" to any projects associated with energy independence. (mp)



Affordable quality healthcare for all Europeans: "a model for the society we stand for"

In a debate with Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas at its September plenary session, the EESC urged the Commission

to be ambitious in implementing the new European care strategy. The EESC put the focus on health workers and their skills, education and working conditions and singled out the building of trust as a prerequisite for the success of the European Health Data Space.

At its plenary session on 22 September, the EESC held a debate on EU health policy initiatives with European Commission Vice President and Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life, **Margaritis Schinas**. EESC president **Christa Schweng** said, "The EESC supports all EU initiatives to create a European Health Union and to increase resilience and preparedness for any future threats."

"We are determined to show that health is not just a policy, it is who we are; this is part of the model of open society we stand for, of our European way of life," **Mr Schinas** stressed.

As the EU institution that was the first to call for the creation of a European Health Union, the EESC has adopted opinions on two of the recent Commission initiatives on health, which aim to ensure that each and every European has access to affordable and high-quality healthcare.

In the opinion on the European Health Data Space (EHDS), the EESC praised the EHDS proposal as an excellent opportunity to empower individuals to access and control their personal health data. It lent its support to a large-scale public communication campaign to help people understand the benefits of the sharing process and to have trust and confidence in the system.

"Trust will be crucial. Citizens need to be comfortable with the use of their data, both in terms of improving public services and of the possible use of these data to combat diseases and develop innovative solutions by researchers," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier**.

The EESC also adopted an opinion on the Health Workforce and Care Strategy, in which it called for an ambitious people-centred care strategy that can improve healthcare and long-term care across the EU, ensuring equal quality standards in all Member States or among regions within each country. It proposed a European care guarantee to ensure that everyone living in the EU has access to affordable care services.

"The care system is a litmus test for our European way of life, which needs to be socially just and inclusive," said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Zoe Tzotze-Lanara**.

Danko Relić, co-rapporteur for the opinion, emphasised the need for an educated, skilled and motivated healthcare workforce. "Health workers must have good working conditions. They must be adequately paid and have decent working hours, enjoy a good work-life balance and have guarantees for their health and safety at work!", **Mr Relić** stressed. (ll)



Fighting energy poverty should top the policy agenda of EU countries

With the number of EU households unable to heat their homes likely to grow, and annual energy inflation hitting over 40%, the EESC in a recent opinion has called on the EU and the Member

States to urgently implement measures to prevent and tackle energy poverty.

The EESC is urging the European Union and Member States to make equal access to energy, and security of energy supply at an affordable cost, their absolute priority.

In an opinion on Tackling energy poverty and the EU's resilience, adopted at its plenary session in September, the EESC acknowledged the importance given to energy in the European Commission's recent initiatives, such as the "Fit for 55" package, the implementation of the European Green Deal and the Renovation Wave. However, the Committee warned that, without swift implementation, strong commitments and concrete measures by Member States, these initiatives would not be sufficient to address the current crisis.

"There should be a common approach to understanding and addressing energy poverty at EU level," said **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, rapporteur for the opinion. "And this approach may lead to a common definition. At the same time, we should be leaving it to each Member State to find tailor-made solutions. They must ensure that the most vulnerable are not left without support."
National measures to mitigate the negative effects of rising prices on the most vulnerable should include direct financial support and social policies, or incentives and support to decrease energy consumption, depending on specific national and local circumstances.

To ensure a truly all-encompassing approach, the EESC called for the establishment of a broad and ambitious political coalition for addressing energy poverty whose actions would be further developed in an EU strategy. Its goal would be to reduce energy poverty to a minimum level by 2030 and eliminate it altogether in the long term.
Alongside the EU institutions, the coalition would involve civil society organisations, including those representing the populations most at risk of energy poverty. Local and municipal authorities should also be involved.

The EESC also stressed the importance of investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency as well as in the large-scale renovation of buildings. Member States, working with local and regional authorities, should prioritise deep renovation that would lead to over 60% energy savings. For this to be feasible, a large amount of private investment is clearly needed. (ll)



Commission's employment guidelines for Member States adequately address the most urgent challenges

The EESC has recently given a favourable assessment of the European Commission guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, describing them as appropriate since they address the most urgent issues in the labour market.

In an opinion adopted at its plenary session in September, the EESC stressed that the increasingly uncertain geopolitical situation - which is likely to negatively affect the EU economy, cause high inflation and recession

and diminish purchasing power - warrants a decisive action from Member States, who should work towards a truly integrated single market and help SMEs scale up.

"Labour shortages are on the rise again and that is why we believe that effective measures should be implemented in order to encourage social partners to work on skills' needs at national level, with action adapted to individual sectors and local situations. Acquisition of relevant skills and competencies is increasingly important for both workers and businesses," **Mariya Mincheva**, rapporteur for the opinion, told the plenary.

According to the EESC, the social partners should play a bigger role in designing and implementing employment, social and economic reforms and policies, including by building their capacity.

One important challenge is to lower the inactivity rate, and targeted support is especially important for the long-term unemployed, the EESC said in the opinion. The opinion also put a special emphasis on in-work poverty and the need for policy instruments such as decent wages, including adequate minimum wages, and well-designed temporary financial incentives, accompanied by targeted and effective skilling and upskilling measures.

Policies designed to support youth, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in the labour market should be also strengthened.
In 2022, the European Commission has proposed a number of amendments to the employment policies of the Member States. They reflect recent initiatives and add new elements linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EESC welcomed the Commission's focus on the post-COVID environment aiming to ensure sustainable growth.

The amended guidelines focus on various issues such as boosting the demand for labour; improving access to employment, lifelong acquisition of skills and competences; improving the functioning of labour markets and the effectiveness of social dialogue and promoting equal opportunities for all. (ll)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Ageing Europe needs more successful business transfers

By Mira-Maria Kontkanen, Member of the EESC's Employers' Group

Compared to start-ups, businesses that are successfully transferred perform better in terms of survival, turnover, profit, innovation and employment. While there is good reason to support Europe's start-up entrepreneurs, business transfers need to be equally promoted on Europe's

path to recovery and growth.

A change of ownership is a natural part of a company's lifecycle and becomes more and more relevant as European entrepreneurs age. Approximately 450 000 firms with 2 million employees are transferred in Europe each year. However, it is estimated that every year, around 150 000 businesses risk unsuccessful transfers, endangering around 600 000 jobs.
Increasing the number of successful business transfers has immediate benefits for the European economy. Well-functioning business transfer ecosystems and support mechanisms not only safeguard European jobs, but also promote economic and social cohesion in rural areas and ensure a variety of products and services, as well as livelihoods in these areas. Business transfers can also facilitate and boost the green and digital transition of European MSMEs, as a transfer of ownership is often a natural time to renew the company and adopt new ways of doing business.

Even though the final responsibility of the business transfer lies with the entrepreneur, there is more to be done at Member State and European level to increase the number of successful business transfers, including:

- awareness-raising activities, such a establishing a business transfer promotion week and national business transfer stakeholder forums;
- establishing an EU-wide business transfer barometer to support evidence-based policy-making, both at European and national level;
- embedding know-how on buying a firm and on succession into entrepreneurship education, and developing incentives for the transfer of small firms to young entrepreneurs;
- developing cross-border MSME transfers, for instance though interlinkages between business transfer marketplaces across the EU.

Europe should aim to reach a point whereby acquiring an existing business is an equally attractive and recognised opportunity as being a start-up entrepreneur. This can only be done if the EU and Member States put business transfer promotion at the heart of their recovery, growth and entrepreneurship policies.

Find the full article in the September edition of the Employers' Group Newsletter. The EESC opinion on *Business transfers as promoters of sustainable recovery growth in the SME sector*, for which Ms Kontkanen was rapporteur, can be found here.



Decent Work Worldwide: Fighting forced labour and improving working conditions in European supply chains

By the EESC Workers' Group

We firmly support the Commission's advancement of decent work, but are concerned that gaps in current proposals may lead to sub-optimal implementation.

Forced labour may appear a distant problem for many Europeans but, in reality, the issue is far less remote than it seems. Many everyday goods – from clothing to smartphones – have been found to contain materials manufactured using forced labour.
Efforts to reduce and prevent modern slavery had resulted in a steady decline in those trapped in forced labour. However, in 2016 this trend was reversed.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that there were 28 million people in forced labour in 2021, 10 million more than in 2016. The number of children aged 5 to 17 engaged in child labour increased by more than 8 million to a total of 160 million during the same period.

The European Union has sought to utilise trade policy to combat modern slavery abroad. These efforts have not been without success. Earlier this year, the ILO declared Uzbekistan free from child and forced labour following work undertaken jointly by the EU, US, Germany, Switzerland and the ILO.

More recently, the EU has sought to strengthen the tools it uses to tackle labour malpractices abroad. In February, the Commission issued a Communication on Decent Work Worldwide which reaffirmed Europe's commitment to championing decent work at home and abroad. The Communication also outlined areas the Commission intends to focus on in strengthening upcoming and existing tools. The proposed Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence would establish a duty for large employers to address negative environmental and human rights effects in their supply chain. Moreover, as part of her State of the Union address, President von der Leyen announced a proposal to prohibit goods made using forced labour from entering into the EU market.

We continue to firmly support the Commission's advancement of decent work. Nonetheless, we are concerned that gaps in current proposals may lead to sub-optimal implementation. Many SME's will not reach the employee or net turnover threshold that would bring them within the remit of the legislation. The use of vague terminology in the directive jeopardises its potency and requires further clarification. A failure to codify structures for social dialogue risks the exclusion of workers as an effective tool in oversight. Europe's efforts to improve labour standards worldwide are clearly noble, but it still remains to be seen whether its proposals will be adequately enforced. (lc)



We need care and healthcare systems that are focused on people, their rights and their needs

By Danko Relić, member of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group and rapporteur for the opinion SOC/720

To develop strong and resilient health and care systems in the European Union, we need an educated, skilled and motivated workforce. We need care and healthcare systems that are focused on people, their rights and their needs.

This also means that people should take part in all relevant discussions, consultations and decisions. If these conditions are met, we will be able to achieve human-centred health coverage for all and the "right to health", as recommended by the Conference on the Future of Europe. It is only in this way that we will be able to guarantee that all Europeans have equal and sustainable access to healthcare that is affordable, preventive, curative and of high quality.

In its recently adopted own-initiative opinion *Health Workforce and Care Strategy for the future of Europe* (SOC/720), the EESC calls for the creation of a European health workforce surveillance service to help Member States establish and maintain planning structures and coordinate cross-border aspects of planning. This would be linked to the right to free movement for health and care workers. The Committee also proposes an update of the Action Plan for the Health and Care Workforce in the European Union, including integrated health and care workforce planning and forecasting and the update of health and long-term care workforce skills, particularly with regard to the opportunities offered by digitalisation.

Find out more about the opinion SOC/720 at: https://europa.eu/!9YgygW

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



"Connecting EU 2022" to address war in Ukraine

The EESC's annual seminar for civil society communicators, taking place in Zagreb on 24-25 November, will zoom in on the impact on the EU of the war in Ukraine, addressing three thorny issues.

"Geopolitical turmoil at Europe's door: the perspective of civil society" will focus on three key aspects of the war:

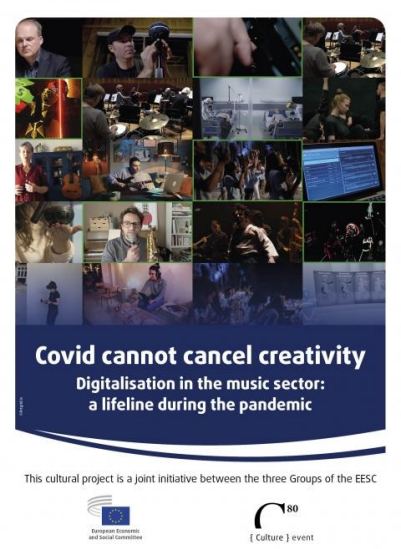
EU enlargement: Will the war change the course of EU enlargement? How prepared is Ukraine, now a candidate country, to join the EU? How fair is this special treatment towards candidate countries that have been waiting in Europe's lobby for years? And how does the prospect of a European geopolitical community fit into all this?

- **Energy**: as the EU turns its back on cheaper Russian gas and oil and European industry and workers come under strain, what can EU countries do to help people weather the storm? Will they be tempted to revert to highly polluting coal or will this speed up a green transition? Can the EU lead its countries out of this crisis as successfully as it did with COVID-19?
- **Communication**: one of the key weapons in this war, communication is making use of all the new potential made available by technology. How are the opposing sides using it? Who is winning on this front and how is the EU copying with the new wave of disinformation?

Top speakers include renowned French-Russian journalist, writer and historian **Galia Ackerman,** journalists **Tim Weber**, specialist on online disinformation and creator of BBC online, **Regis Genté**, co-author of the book "Volodymyr Zelensky: in the mind of a hero", and **Dušan Gajić**, author of the documentary "The Graduates" on the identity crisis triggered in Serbia by the war.

The seminar is part of the "Connecting EU" series, now in its 16th year, which aims to offer a platform where press and communication professionals from civil society organisations can network while discussing current issues of common interest affecting Europe. It brings together EESC members and other EU representatives, partner organisations from Member States, journalists and researchers to debate the hot issues of the day.

The full programme will be available shortly on the EESC's website. The event is by invitation only, but a few places are available for interested stakeholders. To obtain an invitation please write to: pressofficers@eesc.europa.eu.(dm)



Creativity in times of COVID-19: the case of the music industry

The EESC's website is hosting a series of video interviews with music professionals looking into how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed their work.

The cultural and creative sectors were among the industries hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, using digital tools, creativity and innovation, artists were able to stay in touch with their audiences. New forms of content have emerged, some of them showing artists recording in their homes and creating a more personal relationship with their audiences. Digitalisation has also made music more accessible to marginalised and vulnerable groups.

This interview series, entitled "COVID cannot cancel creativity", explores how the sector has adapted to the restrictive public health measures imposed because of COVID-19 through the smart use of digitalisation and innovation, how the pandemic has accelerated digitalisation in the music sector and how innovation can be harnessed after the pandemic. There will be a particular focus on the benefits the music sector is reaping from digitalisation.

The project is a joint initiative of the three groups that make up the EESC (Employers, Workers and Diversity Europe) and will show how crucial culture is, including in times of crisis, and how supporting the sector and helping it survive is essential for our society and will play a fundamental role in driving the recovery.

"COVID cannot cancel creativity" will officially launch on 26 October. You can watch the videos HERE. (ck)



An EESC exhibition marks the 20th anniversary of Europe's common currency

"The Journey of the Euro" consists of a series of images charting the euro's history, combining material from the Historical Archives of the European Union, information provided by the European Commission and exhibits from the Croatian National Bank.

With discussions now underway about the possible introduction of a digital euro, celebrations marking the euro's 20th anniversary coincide with an increase in the number of EU Member States using it as their currency, as Croatia is set to join the euro area on 1 January 2023.

The project invites viewers to trace the journey from the initial concept to the actual introduction of euro coins and banknotes and challenges the audience to reflect and more fully comprehend the significance of having one single currency. It serves as both a representation of peace and the most tangible example of European integration.

The exhibition is being held at the EESC from **5 to 31 October 2022**. (ck)

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