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**President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**"The Conference on the future of Europe: improving EU governance**

**and the involvement of civil society"**

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Dear all, Dear promoters of a federalist and democratic Europe,

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this event! I am very happy to represent here the European Economic and Social Committee, which is an advisory body of the EU institutions, made of 329 members coming from all the 27 Member States and representing all walks of life (employers, trade unions and civil society at large). I would like to thank the organisers, and in particular Luis Miguel Pariza Castanos, expert of our Committee and former brilliant and active member, with whom I had the pleasure to work for many years.

I am particularly happy to exchange views on the Conference on the future of Europe and the involvement of civil society, to ensure that the conference is inclusive, reform-oriented and results-oriented.

As you know, the start of the Conference on the Future of Europe has been delayed because institutional disputes but also because of the pandemic. Instead of reflecting and debating with citizens for two years, we have much less time at our disposal.

Despite that, I think it was still relevant to start a debate on the future of Europe, because we need to make the European Union fit for the future and reflecting citizens' expectations. The fresh experiences that have shown us the strengths and weaknesses of the EU are extremely valuable for this exercise.

The Conference intends to be a unique exercise of participatory democracy. The idea is to give a real say to citizens, on their future. This would allow to put civil society back at the heart of the European political agenda and to regain their trust in the European project.

For this to work, the dialogue with citizens needs to be genuine and meaningful and it needs to lead to concrete results. We have to make sure that we actually listen to the citizens, that we take their suggestions and criticisms seriously, whether we agree with them or not.

The key to the success of the conference lies in a broad, participatory, bottom-up approach involving a wide range of stakeholders and organised civil society.

The EESC, as the representative of European organised civil society, is committed to play an active role in this and to make the difference.

We are well integrated in the process: the EESC will be part of the plenary of the Future Conference, I took part to the launching of the conference in Strasbourg on the 9 May. As EESC president, I also take part to the meetings of the Executive Board as an observer. In terms of content, and this is my initial experience from the meetings so far, we will have a lot of work to do to make the voice of organised civil society really heard.

The European project urgently needs strong participation and support from civil society as a driving for the future. The green and digital transition, for example, will not succeed without broad support from the population.

As you are no doubt aware, the multilingual platform for the Future Conference went online on 19 April. People can engage with one another and discuss their proposals with fellow citizens from all Member States. The input given through the platform will be collected, analysed, monitored, and made publicly available. The key ideas and recommendations from the platform should be used as input for the European citizens' panels and the Plenaries of the Conference, where they will be debated to produce the Conference's conclusions.

The EESC welcomes the platform, as it is a good means to collect feedback from citizens. But I believe that it cannot be the only way to collect citizens' views; it should be seen as a supplement to personal contacts and to face-to face discussions. Also, the representativeness of the contributions must be thoroughly checked.

In order to make the conference a success, to avoid frustration and to avoid a raise of anti-European and populist forces, I see the following challenges for the conference:

First, we need to manage our expectations towards the conference. Due to economic and social hardship cause by COVID-19 everybody's expectations are very high. It is better to arrive at less ambitious conclusions that are acceptable for all rather than diving into high-level philosophical disputes with no chance of agreement. We should approach the conference in an open-minded way, without conclusions already on the table.

Secondly, the Conference must make concrete and measurable progress and not just consist of non-binding discussions with citizens that lead nowhere. I liked Commission Vice President Sefcovic’s proposal to include the conclusions of Conference in the work programme of the Commission in 2022. That would be a concrete outcome. I am in favour of creating a "dashboard" where citizens can follow up on the measures coming out of the conference. People need to be able to get a clear picture of the state of play and a timeline for the topics they worked on. The institutions need to explain why they are or are not following up on certain proposals.

Thirdly, it is time to stop the power fights between institutions and start listening to people's needs and expectations and acting according to their wishes. A feedback mechanism must ensure that the ideas expressed during the Conference events result in concrete recommendations for EU action.

We should go beyond the Brussels bubble and the "usual suspects". We must reach out to the person in the street in each and every corner of the EU to listen to what they have to say. We must engage equally with those already convinced and with those who are hesitant about the union. We need to show what Europe can do, but also be open to criticism.

Finally, organised European civil society voice is a key in the discussion and cannot be side-lined. While feedback from individuals is extremely valuable, feedback from organisations that represent whole societal groups and economy sectors often can be even more substantial in terms of content.

But to be more concrete, I will say some words about the preparations that we do, at the EESC, for the for the Conference on the Future of Europe:

Since the beginning of 2020, the EESC has set up an ad hoc group - that I chair - to discuss our participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe and define some concrete actions.

The Committee has also adopted at its April plenary session a resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe in which it calls on "a new narrative" to reconnect and engage with European citizens. We want to show to people that Europe is a great place to live and prosper, and they need to get involved in shaping the Union that they want. For the younger generations, it is not enough anymore to talk about the importance of the EU as a peace project.

The objective is to rediscover that we are a community based on shared values and that we need to face together, in the best way possible, current and future challenges.

We need a fair and sustainable economic and social recovery from the pandemic, while reaping the opportunities of the green and digital transitions. We need to ensure both the economic prosperity and social inclusion. We need upward convergence, greater cohesion and competitiveness. At the same time all European values as solidarity, social justice, gender equality or sustainable prosperity should be guarded.

Furthermore, the EU should support "the pivotal role played by civil society organisations in promoting and defending European values, democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, against increasing illiberalism, populism and 'shrinking civic space'".

The resolution also stresses the importance of joining forces and working with relevant partners, like the Federalistas del País Vasco and the Union of Europeanists and Federalists of Spain. Besides the national economic and social councils, we also consider your organisations as natural and strong partners. I would be very pleased to see opportunities for cooperation.

I look forward to the discussion and to your ideas of joint work – because at the end of the day, if we really want to bring the European project back to citizens, civil society should be in a driving seat.