**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

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

**Plenary session of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council**

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Dear President Roussinova, Dear colleagues from the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council,

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in your plenary session!

To my regret, due to the sanitary situation, I cannot be in person in Sofia, but I look forward to the time when I will be able to come to your beautiful country and have a real meeting!

Nevertheless, I am very happy to represent in a virtual way the European Economic and Social Committee, which is made of 329 members coming from all the 27 Member States and representing the same groups that you have in the Bulgarian Council: employers, trade unions and civil society at large. I also take this opportunity to greet the 12 members that are also part of the EESC!

Our two institutions have developed over the years a very solid cooperation for which I am grateful. We are working together on many different issues and we particularly appreciate the support that your Council has always given to facilitate our meetings and missions in Bulgaria. Your help is very much appreciated by our members.

I would also like to thank you for your strong commitment in the network of the national ESCs and the EESC and for our annual meetings.

Both the members of the European Committee and the Bulgarian Council are at the beginning of our respective mandates, and we have a lot on our plates, and many challenges to tackle – to name just a few: supporting the recovery of our economies and societies from Covid, contributing to making our countries fit for the future and making the voice of organised civil society heard in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

I am deeply convinced that our organisations should be consulted, listened to and certainly play a key role in the process of EU's recovery and reconstruction – as we are well rooted in the reality of our societies and economies.

Our Committee has already issued proposals for post-COVID-19 crisis reconstruction and recovery, through a resolution adopted in June. I saw that your Council has also issued an opinion on the preparation of the "Recovery and resilience plan of Bulgaria".

When I had the pleasure to meet with President Zornitsa Roussinova, in February, we confirmed our mutual intention to continue and strengthen our cooperation. Since then, I saw that your Council has defined its priorities for the current term of office: 1) European Green Deal and sustainable development 2) Technological transformation and digitalization of the economy and society 3) The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the Action Plan.

Our concerns are totally converging, as my own priority, as EESC President is to have the EESC contribute to a post-Covid Europe that is economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. I also believe in an open, values-based society, which enables all civil society organisations to flourish.

I see economic progress and the development of a social Europe as the two sides of the same coin. We need to make sure that we create the framework conditions for EU's job rich prosperity, innovation and competitiveness, and that all citizens are supported and empowered, so they are confident in the future.

As regards social Europe, the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights serve as a compass for convergence and a fair and sustainable recovery. The Porto Social Summit of the 7 May has been a milestone for relaunching social Europe. I was happy to contribute to it, to participate and have EESC's views reflected in the Porto Declaration. Now, the next step for the EESC will be to draft our opinion on the Action Plan, to be adopted in July.

In the context of the digital and ecological transitions, we must ensure that people are at the very centre of policies and that businesses are part of the discussion. Our measures need to be just and sustainable. They require social investment, like in education and training, lifelong learning, up-skilling, re-skilling of people. They also entail supporting companies to adapt and take an active part in shaping the transitions.

Recently, the EU has shown a huge commitment for EU solidarity: the agreement on the Recovery plan - the largest long-term budget in the EU's history - is a big step forward. Now, we need to make sure that funds actually reach companies and support people in need, like young people, women and vulnerable persons.

Also, we have to be careful that this unprecedented effort does not remain just one isolated episode. That is why we need stable improvements and further thinking on the future of Europe. The Conference on the Future of Europe is giving us a great opportunity to make policies more participatory, effective and adapted to Europeans' needs.

But for this to work, the Conference on the future of Europe needs to be really inclusive, reform-oriented and results-oriented.

We don't have much time at our disposal – barely one year – because of the delays due to the pandemic and institutional disputes.

It is also important to remember that the end of the Conference should represent the starting point to evaluate the process, which should then continue with policy actions and further involvement of citizens.

The Conference intends to put citizens and 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 – with 18 seats. As EESC president, I took part to the launching of the conference in Strasbourg on the 9 May and I also take part and speak in 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.

As you are certainly 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.

I think the platform 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, to debates and face-to face discussions. Also, the representativeness of the contributions must be considered.

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:

It is time to stop the power fights between institutions and start listening to people's expectations. 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.

The Conference must make concrete and measurable progress and not just consist of non-binding discussions with citizens that lead nowhere. A feedback mechanism must ensure that the ideas expressed during the Conference events result in concrete recommendations for EU action.

I liked Commission Vice President Šefčovič’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.

Finally, I think that the organised European civil society voice is key in the discussion and cannot be side-lined. Feedback from individuals is extremely valuable, but the feedback from organisations that represent whole societal groups and economy sectors 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 a high level ad hoc group - that I chair - to discuss our participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe, define some concrete actions and ensure coherence.

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 can be a great place to live and prosper, and people 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 - fundamental rights and the rule of law - and that we need to face together, in the best way possible, current and future challenges.

The resolution also stresses the importance of joining forces and working with relevant partners, and our privileged partners are indeed the national economic and social councils. We are also in the process of signing memoranda of understanding with European Movement International, the civil society organisations of our Liaison Group and Civil Society Europe.

Our members will be happy to participate to debates organised at the national or European level.

The EESC will do "Going Local" activities, that we would like to start in September. These can be meetings or public events that we organize, thanks to our members and their organisations and networks, in all Member States – Bulgaria of course included. These "Going Local Missions" are designed to ensure a real dialogue with participants instead of traditional events. The objective is to make the event very inclusive, reflect Europe’s diversity and gather ideas that reflect our societies as a whole. We want to listen to real-life actors and representatives of civil society organisations, and convey the messages to the European institutions. After each mission, there will be a report.

To launch our activities, we are organising on the 10th of June a kick-off public event. [that will also take place remotely and to which you are all invited]

Thank you for your attention! I look forward to the discussion and to your ideas of further cooperation – 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.

My motto for my presidency is "United for the future of Europe" – and this certainly applies to the relations between our Committee and the national ESCs.

Together, we can do it! I am looking forward to our fruitful cooperation!