**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

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

**European Forum for New Ideas**

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you at this prestigious and highly respected forum. Let me congratulate you to your very successful activities and the already 10th anniversary edition of your conference.

Committed to European integration, the EESC is an institutional consultative body. We contribute to strengthen the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU by enabling civil society organisations from all Member States to express their views at European level.

The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly the biggest challenge ever faced by the EU. It has caused an unprecedented recession. At the same time, we face the green and digital transition of our economy and society. Digitalisation and AI lead to a new industrial revolution. Against this extremely challenging background, we urgently need to build a sustainable socio-economic system of the 21st century.

The EESC sees three core priorities for Europe: economic prosperity, social inclusiveness and environmental sustainability.

According to the last economic forecasts of the European Commission of July 2021, we are gradually "overcoming" the dramatic effects of the pandemic. GDP is now forecast to grow by 4.8% in 2021 and 4.5% in 2022 in both the EU and the euro area. However, we need to be aware that relevant risks remain. Also, it is interesting to note that - amongst the largest Member States - Germany is expected to return to pre-crisis levels of output already by the end of this year, while Spain and Italy will achieve this result only in 2022. The Polish economy is projected to grow faster in 2022 than the EU but faces a higher inflation rate than the EU.

In 2019, the EU's employment rate was 73,1%. In June 2021, we were down to 71,9%. For Poland, the Commission forecasted an unemployment rate that is less than half of the EU's for 2021 and 2022.

When looking at the EU's youth unemployment the situation is even bleaker: it stood at 16,4% in August 2021. We also know that the situation is very different from country to country. While in Greece, Spain and Italy, the youth unemployment rate equals about 30%, in Poland it's 11,2 %, in Germany and the Netherlands, it is below 10%.

Young people were severely hit by the pandemic and had more difficulties in transitioning from education to the labour market. As such, we have welcomed the reinforced Youth Guarantee since it is an important and concrete instrument to combat youth unemployment, highlighting apprenticeships, traineeships, education and job offers. In our opinion, fighting youth unemployment is a democratic, economic and social priority.

I would still like to highlight that many of the EU measures made a tangible impact: suspension of state aid and fiscal rules; the new SURE programme for the preservation of employment, the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme of the ECB to name a few. They have been very effective as employment declined by merely 1,5% in the EU compared to a decline in real economic activity of more than 6%.

In this context, the EESC has also welcomed the NextGenerationEU fund. The key priority is to make sure that the 750 billion Euros will be invested as quickly and as efficiently as possible in all the Member States.

A study of the Warsaw Institute for Economic and European Studies (wise-europa.eu) concludes consequently that “For Poland, the biggest recovery challenge is not associated with the disbursement process of the available EU funds but ensuring that the projects and reforms identified by the NRRP answer to the strategic challenges of the 21st century”.

Let us all hope that the period of intense uncertainty ahead of the pending approval of Poland's National recovery and resilience plan will come to an end soon.

I must admit that I regret that the Polish Constitutional Tribunal recently decided in its ruling, that EU law does not have supremacy on the Polish law. This might further delay approval of Poland's National recovery and resilience plan by the EC, that is currently withheld. This would be very unfortunate for Polish business and people. Support in Poland for the EU is high and EU funds have made a material contribution to past growth which averaged a remarkable figure of 3.7% annually since 2004.

As regards the National recovery and resilience plans across Member States, the involvement of the organised civil society is still poor and little effective. The BusinessEurope’s Reform Barometer 2021 gives the same message: social partners have not been involved or in any case not involved enough by the governments. The EESC will remain extremely vigilant and fight for the involvement of organised civil society in the implementation of the National recovery and resilience plans.

Another area, the Pandemic showed us a clear need for a closer European cooperation is health.

The pandemic has put a lot of pressure on the health systems and workforce and exposed the lack of strategic autonomy of the EU in this field. It has shown that no health system alone can face a virus that recognizes no borders in an interconnected world and win against it. That is why, the European Health Union is an example of a united and solidarity-based reply and a first positive step in the direction of successfully managing these challenges together in the future.

Concretely, further action is needed, first, to increase investments in health to make health systems more resilient; and, second, to protect healthcare workers by improving their health and safety through common work standards and guaranteeing better working conditions, including salaries, to make the profession more attractive.

Finally, I would like to mention the Conference of the Future of Europe. Its aim is to look at the medium to long term future of the EU and what reforms should be made to its policies and institutions. It is important to remember the original purpose of the Conference as a tool to bring the EU closer to citizens. That is why we have to ensure this is a moment to listen and engage with citizens. We must prove that this dialogue is meaningful. Tangible results need to be delivered.

The truth is we have a large silent majority. Most European citizens see the EU as far away from their lives: they do not know it, speak its jargon or fully understand it. This is why the Conference on the Future of Europe will only be a success if we manage to get the EU closer to its citizens and make them feel a renewed sense of ownership and belonging.

An emotional link with the EU is urgently needed. This will only be possible through a new narrative, one that puts civil society back in the driving seat. This is a focal point for us, which we underlined in our Resolution on a new narrative for Europe.

The EESC believes in the need for a strong, shared narrative for the European Union.

From our point of view, Europe has to be considered as:

1) guardian of shared fundamental values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law,

2) global promoter of sustainability, open and fair trade and multilateralism,

3) haven for a unique economic and social model based on fair competition and solidarity in an area without internal borders and

4) driver of a sustainable prosperity; with a strong European civil society at its heart.

The Conference on the Future of Europe should be the vehicle through which we can achieve these ambitions and bring about long-lasting change in the EU.

Civil society organisations are crucial in identifying solutions to today's challenges. They are crucial in building trust, shaping public opinions and as positive agents of change.

And fora a like yours are essential for this purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you once more for giving me the chance to be with you today and let me wish you a great success for your 10th edition conference.