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**Connecting EU 2021 seminar.**

**"What kind of Europe do you dream of? Civil society and the CoFoE"**

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*[check against delivery]*

Ladies and gentlemen, honourable guests, dear colleagues,

What kind of Europe do you dream of? – this is a question we’re asking ourselves today. A question that doesn’t have right or wrong answer. A question where the answers differ in the east, west, south or north of the EU, a question that highlights our incredible diversity.

Before we start discussing what the answer is to every single one of us, I would like to challenge you with another question: do you dare to dream about Europe? Are you proud of our European dream?

The Americans are. They made a trade mark out of their American dream that symbolises unlimited chances to achieve success – no matter what your starting point is. Whether it remains the case in modern America is a different part of the story but this is an important part of national unity and pride.

The European dream was alive in the second half of the last century when the founding fathers dared to think about cooperation closer than ever before, dared to think about Europe with peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, the more the initial European dream became true, the further European integration advanced, the more obvious it became to the Europeans.

It became too good in blaming Europe for everything – be it economic crisis, migration crisis or even crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Too often in public perception Europe’s response is too slow or not courageous enough. Too often all the successes are thanks to the member states and all the failures are because of Brussels.

I believe we have plenty of reasons to be proud of the European Union and of what we’ve achieved so far. Despite inefficiencies and imperfections, the European integration is a unique success story. We should be proud of it and we should dare to dream about even more. The European Union is delivering and we should focus on building new, positive narrative for the EU.

We should remember about that especially when we see what is currently happening at our external borders. Thousands of people are ready to risk everything – including their lives – to be a part of that European dream. For thousands of people, Europe is a place where they seek a shelter from war, from authoritarianism, from poverty. They dream of reality that we too often take for granted and – in consequence - don’t appreciate anymore.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If you ask me what is a Europe of my dreams I would answer as following: Europe that is economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, Europe with well-respected rule of law.

At the EESC, we believe that the future of the European Union will not be without challenges, at all levels and these will call for all of us to work together. For this reason, we know we will need to be efficient and able to take decisive actions when needed, also maintaining a good level of communication and transparency towards citizens will be a pre-requisite.

The world is becoming more connected, integrated and complex, it is also increasingly more exposed to the effects of climate change, and we know we are going to face a long period of uncertainty where cohesion will become a necessary element for success.

In this situation, if the goal is clear, the desire to achieve a resilient, green, digital, inclusive, social and competitive Europe, the route needs to go through an honest discussion about the future, not just among ourselves, but also with everyone who will listen.

Besides the priorities mentioned, the EESC has welcomed, since the very beginning, the adoption of the Next Generation EU. Now of course the key priority will be to make sure that the funds will be invested as quickly and as efficiently as possible in all Member States. Today many European citizens see the EU as far away from their lives: they do not know it, speak its jargon or fully understand how it works. They also do not simply want to be the passive objective of institutional communication; they want to be actively involved.

The Conference is an experiment in addressing this issue. At the European Economic and Social Committee, we believe that the Conference will only be a success if we manage to get the EU closer to its citizens and make them rediscover an emotional link with the EU.

The key point of Europe, for a long time, has been being in the same boat together and a sense of common purpose for Europeans. We need to preserve, reinforce this feeling, by ensuring the exercise is not just empty, ensuring it is available to citizens, that it has a result in line with the opinions expressed by citizens and that the result is then followed by decision makers.

It is for this reason that I proposed the creation of a dashboard, that will clearly define the proposals of the Conference and will ensure transparency on their application, explaining the reasons behind the eventual decision not to apply parts of the proposals.

As the house of the European civil society, one of the main priorities of the EESC for this Conference and I believe one of the keys to its success is as already mentioned- to define a new narrative for Europe, one that puts civil society back in the driving seat.

It is for this reason that the EESC, after supporting the organization of the Conference since day one, now is participating in its Executive Board and Plenary and has launched a series of consultations in all EU Member States. These consultations took place starting last summer and will continue until the beginning of the new year. Our aim is to ensure civil society is properly involved, as we believe this is a necessary part of any dialogue with citizens and it is going to be a key element in translating citizens' voices into legislative proposals.

The Committee will show its conclusions in the first quarter of 2022 and we will then present them to the bodies of the Conference, supporting it within its operations and outside with all stakeholders. At the end of this exercise, it is also our intention to continue this experiment, learning from the lessons of these chaotic two years to evolve better forms of citizens and civil society involvement in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The good news is that we can not only dream about Europe but shape its future according to our dreams. The ongoing conference on the Future of Europe is an excellent opportunity for every one of us to contribute to making dreams come true.

That is why, I would like to end my speech with a kind request to each of you – please do get involved in the Conference on the Future of Europe. Please, be active, join an event organised in your neighbourhood or organise one. Engage in the discussion, send your contribution. Do not be afraid to speak aloud what kind of Europe you dream of.

Thank you very much for your attention.