**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

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

**Annual meeting of the presidents and secretaries-general**

**of the EESC and the Economic and Social Councils of the EU**

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Dear President Beaudet, Presidents of the ESCs, Secretaries-Genera and dear colleagues,

I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to this annual meeting of the presidents and secretaries-general of the EESC and national ESCs.

This is my first annual meeting since my election as EESC President one year ago, and I would like to take this first opportunity that I have to thank you all for the very solid cooperation with the EESC. We are regularly working together on different issues and occasions, like for example in the context of the European Semester.

I am happy to be here together with EESC's Secretary General Gianluca Brunetti and with a small delegation – in person and remotely – our two Vice-presidents Giulia Barbucci and Cillian Lohan; our three groups' presidents: Stefano Mallia, Oliver Röpke and Seamus Boland.

I am also very pleased that so many national ESCs participate in this meeting – whether virtually or in person – to discuss this year’s theme, namely “Participatory democracy and its role in making the EU resilient and future-proof”.

As we know, 2021 is in many respects a very special year: it marks the will of Europe and its organised civil society to recover and become more resilient in the face of the greatest challenge it has ever had to deal with: the Covid-19 pandemic. It also marks the will to listen more to citizens and organised civil society, and this is what we see in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

After almost two years since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, we still feel the impact of the economic and social crisis, which caused a severe contraction of the economy and rise in unemployment, especially among the younger generation. The pandemic has also exposed pre-existing problems and has widened inequalities. The challenges that we knew before – like the need to handle the twin transitions in a successful way, ageing, globalisation, a changing geopolitical landscape have not stopped in the meantime.

The latest economic forecasts are better than expected. EU economy is rebounding faster than predicted and we can count on more growth. However – and you will be the best placed to talk about that – there are differences between countries and regions. We also need to make sure that we have a job-rich and inclusive recovery.

This positive economic outlook is fragile and depends heavily on the further evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. And what we see these days – a sharp increase of new COVID cases – is worrying. Overall, 76 % of adult population in the EU is vaccinated, but there are also big differences between countries. We need to do better on this front as well and I am sure that organized civil society can also play a role in supporting Governments in their efforts to increase vaccination rates throughout Europe.

Dear colleagues,

We are here today to discuss and try to reach a common vision on EU's priorities for future and how to achieve them. We want to pass on the message to EU institutions, and in particular in the context of the discussions taking place in the Conference on the Future of Europe. We are all convinced of the importance and added value of participatory democracy – by definition, it is in our DNA. Yet, we still see that ESCs and civil society organisations are not always involved, consulted and listened to as they should. So we need to remind to all levels of policy-makers of the need for a genuine involvement.

Speaking from the EESC, we agree that we need to take this opportunity of the recovery efforts to "build back better" and to emerge stronger after this crisis. We cannot just go back to "normal": we need to both facilitate the transition towards a green and digital Europe and to reinforce our European economy, for more competitiveness, prosperity, fairness and inclusiveness.

Failure is not an option. According to a recent Eurobarometer, nearly two-thirds of EU citizens trust the EU to make the right decisions in the future to respond to the pandemic.

We need to use in the best possible way the instruments we have. The unprecedented NewGenerationEU and its Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Fit for 55 package. They can effectively support the transition to climate neutrality and help alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. The Green Deal is the new European growth strategy, with its target of climate neutrality and resilience by 2050.

The Porto Social Summit created a new momentum and the European Pillar of Social Rights serves as a compass for upward social convergence.

The EU Digital Agenda should be about empowering people and businesses to embrace a digital future that is people-centred, sustainable and more prosperous.

The completion of the internal market and the strengthening of the Euro area are also parts of our vision.

Last but not least, our most precious asset are our citizens and the organised civil society. Involving them in policy-shaping processes is an essential precondition for the flourishing of a European Union built on democracy, respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Strengthening participatory democracy is the only way forward to successfully meet today's and tomorrow's challenges and to adapt to the current highly dynamic environment.

We need to show that listening to civil society's voice has an added value and that social partners and other civil society organisations can contribute to make policies of better quality, more adapted to the reality on the ground and better implemented.

This is also the message of the EESC to the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which we are involved through my own participation in the Executive Board and with several members in the Conference's plenary. [I will go more in detail when we will have the discussions on that point.]

People see the EU as far away from their realities, they don't understand EU's jargon. So, the Conference is a unique opportunity to reconnect and engage with its citizens and organised civil society and involve them in shaping our common future.

To be successful, the Conference needs first of all to be really participatory, to involve people from across Europe, the "silent" majority. 36.000 people have participated to the online platform – we are far from a massive and country-balanced involvement of citizens. We can and must do better.

Civil society organisations in all EU countries, our EESC and national Economic and Social Councils like yours have a key role to play to stimulate discussions and collect contributions from each country.

To meet the expectations, the Conference also needs to produce tangible results. EU institutions will need to show, in all transparency, whether or not they are translating people's requests into EU initiatives. And if no action is taken on some ideas, the reasons must be explained. This is why I have myself asked for an online dashboard.

I am looking forward to learn more about your work, in each ESC, how you contribute to the Conference.

I hope our joint contribution and I hope, the conclusions that we could present at the end of this meeting, would allow to reinforce participatory democracy, the roles of our ESCs – with the final goal to put civil society back at the heart of the European political agenda and to regain people's trust in a European project in which we all strongly believe.

I am looking forward to our discussions!

Thank you.