**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

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

**CNEL-EESC Conference**

**"Geopolitics of energy strategies in the Euro-Mediterranean region"**

**Opening Speech**

**17 Oct 2022**

*[check against delivery]*

Dear President Treu,

Dear Ms. Toia,

Dear Mr. Mastrojeni,

Dear Mr. Gualaccini,

Dear Dimitris,

Dear participants,

I would first like to thank President Treu for hosting today's conference and for our excellent overall cooperation! As already mentioned by Mr. Dimitriadis, this event is a good symbol of joint work of our institutions, to put together a very interesting programme on such a timely topic.

Timely indeed, in the context of the unprovoked and illegal war in Ukraine. A war that is taking lives and destroying the country. The EESC has, since the very first day of the aggression, strongly condemned this unprovoked and illegal aggression. We also firmly reject and condemn the illegal annexation by Russia of Ukrainian regions, undermining the rules-based international order and putting global security at risk. From the beginning, EESC's Members and their organisations offered humanitarian, logistical and medical assistance, as well as support for Ukrainians and their families to adapt to their new reality – there are now about 7.6 million people in the EU, mostly women and children. The social partners now play a particularly important role in supporting refugees' integration into the labour market. The Committee as such has also turned its solidarity into action, hosting for example a Ukrainian Civil Society Hub where around 30 civil society representatives can pursue their work for their country. Also, through our EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, our members speak regularly with their Ukrainian counterparts.

The war in Ukraine, in addition to causing death and devastation in the country, has also led to a number of challenges at European and international level, affecting the economy and the people. The weaponization of energy has changed the architecture of the European energy market, has increased energy poverty, and made it absolutely essential to speed up the transition to a sustainable energy system. This is something that was already needed for a long time, in the context of tackling climate change. Now, the green transition is more urgent than ever. Our participants from Italy or other Mediterranean countries know very well that the Mediterranean region has been earmarked as one of the climate crisis hotspots on a global level. The effects of climate change are seen across the world, and this year's driest summer in 500 years is an emergency call that we have to act now.

With this in mind, today's event and discussions are very timely. We need to work together to understand how we can make a swift shift to a low-carbon society, and facilitate private and public investment to a sustainable energy transition. Today, it has become clear that those who master clean technology, export green energy or import less fossil fuel stand to benefit in long run from a successful energy transition.

There are many challenges and opportunities linked to green transition. In the short term, we might find ourselves more dependent on gas imports. This is especially problematic in the current market environment with supply bottlenecks and constantly rising gas prices. Another important challenge is the shifting of investments from fossil fuels towards renewable projects. Direct investment, especially in the MENA region, is still disproportionately focusing on fossil fuel projects.

On the other hand, there are numerous opportunities linked to energy transition. An additional 2 million jobs could be created by 2050 in sectors such as sustainable transport, renewable energy production and the circular economy. Developing technologies for renewable energies will increase energy security and reduce dependence on energy imports. Many countries of the Mediterranean region could even become net energy exporters due to their huge potential for renewable energy.

Green hydrogen represents another important opportunity linked to energy transition. The Southern Mediterranean has been identified as one of the three major corridors for green hydrogen imports by the EU. Its production of solar and wind energy, its proximity to the EU and potential low costs of hydrogen production allows the Southern Mediterranean be placed at the centre of the EU green hydrogen supply chain. The cooperation with the countries of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood will be further reinforced by the establishment of the Mediterranean hydrogen partnerships.

The EU has concluded such a hydrogen partnership with Egypt, this partnership will support Egypt's renewable sector and help the country to construct the necessary infrastructure. Trans-Mediterranean interconnectors are important elements in this context.

Dear participants,

There are many challenges, but even more opportunities linked to energy transition. But these policies must be put in place with a broad involvement of employers, workers and other civil society organisations in order to achieve a fair transition process leaving no one behind. Spearheaded by the European Green Deal, the Euro-Mediterranean region can seize new opportunities for cooperation in the energy sector to the benefit of all involved stakeholders.

Thank you very much. I wish you all excellent discussions and a productive conference.