



European Economic
and Social Committee

January
2021



Diversity Europe Newsletter



**POVERTY REDUCTION:
OUR PRIORITY FOR 2021**

FOREWORD

Séamus BOLAND (IE)

President, Diversity Europe Group



Dear colleagues,

I will begin by wishing all Members and readers of the Diversity Europe Newsletter and their families a very happy and healthy new year and hopefully a better one than the year now ended.

In 2021, we will continue to remember loved ones, who have passed away because of this

pandemic, while at the same time thinking of the many bereaved families, who are coming to terms with their loss. History will record the effects on all of us during this time. It will speak in numbers: the number who died, the number who were seriously ill, the number who had 'long COVID'. It will record levels of unemployment and will document the public service given by people working in hospitals, and health in general, as well as the many people who ensured that all necessary services could continue. As Members of the Diversity Europe Group, we will ensure that it documents the many civil society organisations and their personnel, who worked tirelessly providing assistance to families forced to isolate in their homes.

History will also record the efficiency of our scientists, who in record time have developed a vaccine capable of protecting us from this virus. Indeed, it looks like the technology used will be far reaching and will revolutionise the way we develop new health technology. In EU terms, the roll out of the vaccine has also been a challenge. It is clear that until 80% of our population are vaccinated, normal life - as we know - cannot continue.

So, what will normal life look like post COVID-19? We can see some of the thinking as set out in the objectives of the [presidency of the Council of the EU](#)¹ published by the Government of Portugal. They include:

- to promote Europe's recovery, leveraged by the climate and digital transitions;

- to implement the European [Pillar of Social Rights](#)² as a key element for ensuring fair and inclusive climate and digital transitions;
- to strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy keeping it open to the world.

In welcoming the Portuguese presidency objectives, the Diversity Europe Group will look to measures designed to ensure that the recovery includes all members of our communities, especially people who exist below the poverty line. We know that the pandemic has been exacerbated in areas where there are high poverty levels and is in itself a cause of great poverty. In this context, it is expected that the consequences of the pandemic will be felt for many years after it has ended. For this reason, focuses the January issue of the Diversity Europe Newsletter again on our Members' ideas for poverty reduction and related activities of their organisations.

In particular, the damage done to Member State economies as will be demonstrated by unemployment and weaknesses in our health service, will need to be addressed. It is welcome that the EU as an entity has strongly come to the fore in the area of financial support and the management of the vaccine. This approach has meant that vaccine distribution will occur in equal measure across all Member States, ensuring that countries are not competing with each other.

The recovery is not just about our economies. It is also about ensuring that strong regulations, which were necessary to curb the spread of the virus, do not become permanent. One of the many sacrifices that we have all had to make was a voluntary curb on our freedoms.

Members in our Group will need to bring to the fore their expertise and knowledge, in order to ensure that all programmes, whether it is the execution of the [multiannual financial framework and the Next Generation EU instrument](#)³ or the discussions on the Future of Europe, are delivered fairly and equitably.

1. Portuguese presidency of the Council of the EU, <https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/>

2. European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://europa.eu/Rc63QY>

3. European Commission, 2021-2027 long-term EU budget & Next Generation EU, <https://europa.eu/lkF87tr>

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Of course other issues will also require our attention. The threat caused by Climate Change is real and must continue to be addressed. Will we really approve the [European Climate Law](https://europa.eu/!dM89jM)⁴ and become the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050? Another issue is digitalisation and the many challenges it will bring, particularly in terms of reach, management of data and access to all. Underpinning all of this, we must ensure that fundamental rights are guaranteed and that citizens are protected from the worst elements of populism. In that context all Members of the Diversity Europe Group have work to do. So please enjoy and make 2021 a better year.

Séamus Boland
President of the Diversity Europe Group
of the European Economic and Social Committee

4. European Commission, European Climate Law, <https://europa.eu/!dM89jM>

POVERTY REDUCTION: OUR PRIORITY FOR 2021

Poverty reduction: a priority for the Italian Forum of the Third Sector and its members

Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT)

*Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group
President, EESC thematic study group on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Former Spokesperson, Forum Terzo Settore (Third Sector Forum)
President, Centre for Autonomy (Centro per l'Autonomia)*

The **Forum del Terzo Settore**⁵ is an Italian umbrella organisation comprising the big national, non-profit, solidarity-based networks. It seeks to give them a voice at institutional and political level and in Italian society, promoting democratic bodies which do not make profits and which are based on the values of civic service delivered with no price tag attached and work for the good of society. The *Forum of the Third Sector* is huge: **it represents 94% of Italy's 350 000 non-profit organisations, 5 million volunteers and 1.5 million workers and 4+% of GDP** (ISTAT data). The Forum aims to provide an institutional structure enabling civic service and work for the good of society to develop in the social and circular economy.



Pietro Vittorio Barbieri @EESC

The Forum's **founding document**, signed by a young Luca Jahier (Member of the Diversity Europe Group and former EESC president (2018-2020)), was strongly influenced by a manifesto entitled "Solidarity is not a luxury". Welfare and poverty and the institutional recognition of Italy's third sector are central themes which go hand in hand.

The Forum therefore tackles poverty from the perspective of dialogue with the political and parliamentary spheres.

However, the lion's share of member networks is made up of social organisations focusing in a variety of ways on poverty. These are organisations which are active in the field on a daily basis, helping homeless people, handing out meals, clothing and medication, helping shut-ins, providing income support, promoting empowerment and vocational training, helping people enter the labour market and even supporting recreational activities. Work is a key issue for Italy's third sector. Protected forms of work can help prevent vulnerable people, such as those with disabilities and mental health issues, falling into poverty.

There are four strands to the Italian third sector's push against poverty:

- providing relief, i.e. the attempt to provide immediate and daily assistance to people who are very badly off and living in extreme poverty;
- providing daily help to people living in absolute poverty, and promotion of social inclusion for those already receiving assistance and who have escaped extreme poverty;
- promoting labour market inclusion for those at risk of poverty or from groups where one worker in three is in a vulnerable position;
- providing space for recreation, art and sport – leisure activities which if not for the third sector would be out of reach to people at risk of poverty.

Some organisations have focused on **developing forms of self-representation for people living in poverty**. The process is obviously complex and the people concerned must already be in a position to repre-



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5. Forum del Terzo Settore, Italian Forum of the Third Sector, <https://www.forumterzosettore.it/>

sent themselves or must no longer be out of reach. It is a complex but at the same time rewarding and most importantly democratic process, which ensures that people are able to take their lives back into their own hands.

Although a significant number of third sector organisations dealing with poverty focus their efforts on relief services, the shared goal is always to **free people from poverty**. Consequently, the *Forum of the Third Sector* has helped set up the ***Alleanza contro la povertà*** (Alliance Against Poverty) which brings together a number of organisations which are not actually members, such as trade unions. The Forum clearly plays an important role: it is a member of the executive body of

this organisation, which contributed to the first national initiative combating poverty, known first as the *Reddito di inclusione* (inclusion income) and then as the *Reddito di cittadinanza* (citizenship income).

One of the Forum's key responsibilities, which is also laid down by national law, is to stay in **contact with banking foundations as regards social initiatives** tapping their profits. Initiatives set up in parallel with banking foundations include the *CON IL SUD* (With the South) Foundation and the *Fondo per la povertà minorile educativa* (Fund tackling the issue of inadequate education among young people). The *CON IL SUD* Foundation has a yearly budget of EUR 30-40 million

and supports third sector activities in southern Italy, where poverty is a particular problem. The *Fondo per la povertà minorile educativa* has a yearly budget of EUR 120 million, used to combat inadequate education among young people all across Italy. There are many projects, and they are monitored using scientifically approved indicators and criteria.

The member organisations of the *Forum of the Third Sector* include also non-governmental organisations that fight poverty all over the world. They do extraordinary work in Africa, Asia, Middle East, Central and South America with little state funding but revenues of fundraising.

Poverty reduction and energy transition can go hand in hand

Jan DIRX (NL)

Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group
Liaison Officer, Groene11 (Green11),
Dutch nature and environmental organisations



Jan Dirx @ EESC

The energy transition (the transition to a climate-neutral energy supply) faces many obstacles. One of these is that a fairly large number of households are financially unable to carry out the required energy-saving measures in their homes, even though these measures would reduce their energy bills. My organisation in the Netherlands, *Natuur & Milieu*⁶, has recently developed a plan to tackle this problem, namely a **financial support**

scheme for home insulation. This scheme helps to reduce both CO₂ emissions and poverty.

Three quarters of homes in the Netherlands are poorly insulated. *Natuur & Milieu* believes that the government should start helping people financially with home insulation. Our organisation has developed a plan for this in the form of an "Insulation Credit" (a new subsidy scheme) for home owners, which is calculated by the renowned research agency *CE Delft*⁷. The credit significantly reduces CO₂ emissions, lowers energy bills for households and creates new jobs in the construction sector. The fully developed proposal has been presented to the government and parliament and is in line with the wish expressed earlier by parliament that a new national insulation programme be introduced.

The credit, with a maximum of EUR 2,000 per home, may be **used for cavity-wall or floor insulation**. These insulation measures yield the

most CO₂ gains, and are the simplest and least expensive to install. A total of 2.5 million homes – both owner-occupied and rental homes without cavity-wall or floor insulation – are eligible for the credit.

According to calculations, **this scheme will eventually yield a reduction of 2 megatons of CO₂**. That is two thirds of the reduction in emissions required of buildings in the Netherlands by 2030 according to the National Climate Agreement.

To finance this scheme, the government must make EUR 3.1 billion available over a period of eight years, or EUR 0.4 billion per year. On the other hand, it will create extra jobs for the construction sector, which is in dire straits due to the COVID-19 crisis. *CE Delft* estimated that the Insulation Credit could generate between 3,700 and 6,700 jobs.

6. *Natuur & Milieu*, <https://www.natuurenmilieu.nl/english/>

7. Research agency *CE Delft*, <https://www.cedelft.eu/>

Meanwhile, the Dutch parliament has instructed the government to explicitly include an ambitious home insulation programme in its plans for spending the resources from the EU recovery fund's [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#).⁸



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Instead of giving someone a fish, teach them how to fish!

Javier GARAT (ES)

Secretary-General, Spanish Fishing Confederation CEPESCA

President, Europêche, European organisation of ship-owners, fishermen and employers

Fishing has from its earliest beginnings been inextricably linked to a number of features that are reflected in numerous writings from antiquity. In my view, these features are still a core part of the profession and will remain so, as they are almost inseparable. One such feature is the humble origin of our trade, closely associated with the survival of coastal communities. This is why fishing inevitably demonstrates an extraordinary awareness of the need to do all it can to help alleviate world poverty, in a natural way.

Because of this spirit, fisheries immediately and naturally signed up to ten of the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁹ set in 2000. And the first and second of these are, respectively, to end poverty and to achieve zero hunger, which are closely linked. This commitment, far from being symbolic, is part of our daily work, because if there is one thing that I have learned during my years of involvement with the fisheries sector, it is that commitments are met.



Javier Garat

Apart from the 880 million people whose **income is based on the fisheries value chain**, or the fact that twelve per cent of the world's population depends on **fishing for its livelihood, fishing vessels also contribute every day to the growth of local economies** in many developing countries, affecting aspects such as the establishment of communities and the vocational training of their members, or boosting the economic viability of vulnerable groups such as women in these countries.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)¹⁰, fish accounts for 20% of the animal protein consumed daily by 3.1 billion people and 15% for another 1.3 billion, thus **helping to reduce malnutrition and hunger**

in the world. It is therefore essential that sound fisheries management measures are developed to enable responsible and sustainable fishing in all seas and oceans. And we are on the right track, although there is still room for improvement. Indeed, according to the FAO, 65.8% of the world's fish stocks are at biologically sustainable levels, and 78.7% of the fish landed in the world comes from fish stocks that are within biologically sustainable levels.

Spain, a traditionally seafaring and fishing nation, makes a huge contribution to this work through its **coastal and long-distance fleets**, which are members of CEPESCA¹¹, the body that promotes and contributes to these actions. We must not forget that fishing vessels operating in the waters of numerous countries **have to dock in local ports** and use a range of different services to be able to keep working. These are often services that did not exist previously and which the fleet has helped to create.

8. Council of the EU, Recovery and Resilience Facility, <https://europa.eu/irk98Gm>

9. UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

10. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/home/en/>

11. Spanish Fishing Confederation CEPESCA, <https://cepesca.es/>

In addition to contributing wealth through these objective needs, our **fishing businesses provide a range of charitable schemes**, such as the donation of fish products and essentials to different social organisations and institutions - women's groups, for example - which have enabled them to set up fish marketing projects for other communities, thus providing them with an income and a way of life. There is also the creation of nurseries, high schools and sports academies to train local communities in countries outside the EU, the construction of housing for workers and their families, and programmes of scholarships and bursaries for students.



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In many countries, especially in Africa, the **good wages paid to the seafarers** who work on our ships have even enabled them to set up small lo-

cal fishing businesses, thus generating prosperity and economic stability for their communities.

Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere: Are we there yet?

Kinga JOÓ (HU)

*Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group
Vice-President, National Association of Large Families (NOE)
President, Social Responsibility Board,
National Cooperation Fund (NEA)*

I sincerely doubt there are any colleagues who do not look at **poverty indicators and statistics**, at least occasionally. Here at the EESC, by definition our work covers those who need some form of assistance, support or special attention because of their living conditions.

It may sound like I am taking my job home with me, but I can hardly wait for the annual figures and the latest reports to see whether Hungary has succeeded in reducing its poverty levels and where it stands in the European ranking. I am always very happy to see an improvement, because I am well aware of the huge efforts made by government bodies, local governments, charities and civil society organisations to eradicate poverty.



Kinga Joó @ EESC

Then there are the **EU's major strategic programmes** (e.g. European Social Fund, Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived and Youth Guarantee), which have worked with multiple target groups to reduce social and regional disparities. At present, the **Child Guarantee**¹² is one of the new draft programmes, which, if implemented, would ensure essential services and care for every child in the EU, such as free education and healthcare, adequate nutrition and housing, and affordable culture and leisure activities.

Some might legitimately wonder – in the light of all the aid schemes and targeted measures and given that the figures have been steadily improving over recent years – when we will be able to say “we have got there”.

The answer is that this is a very long and complex process which we have to pursue as quickly as possible, without being overhasty. It is a process marked by setbacks, whether as a result of force majeure or for other reasons. We have to understand that.

What does poverty mean in practice? I would like to share with you a recent story from our association, the National Association of Large Families (NOE)¹³, which has become one of the most illustrative examples of the question for me.

As schools were forced to shift to on-line education in the spring, we collected tablets donated by private

¹² European Commission, Child Guarantee, <https://europa.eu/!hK88MU>

¹³ National Association of Large Families (NOE), <https://noe.hu/home/>



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individuals and companies and delivered them to families in need. During these months, mobile operators provided unrestricted internet access throughout the country, content was made technologically available online, and the problem seemed to be

solved. Just a few weeks later, however, the follow-up revealed to us that many of the beneficiary families were not using the tablets. The reason was very simple: they could not recharge the devices regularly, as they also had limited access to electricity. Of course,

we also found solutions to this problem thanks to local public institutions (e.g. cultural and community centres), which opened their doors and allowed children to recharge the devices.

For me, the above example demonstrates that although targeted support is very important, it is of little avail in the long term without comprehensive measures developed with a pre-emptive, sustainable, multi-generational approach.

In any case, I very much fear that the poverty statistics for 2021 will show a downward trend, reflecting the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak, but I am nevertheless confident that the EU will be the first to deliver on SDG 1, “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”.

High-quality education can help finding a faster route out of poverty

Svjetlana MARIJON (HR)
President, Association Zamisli



Svjetlana Marijon @EESC

In 1993, when I was sixteen, I came to Zagreb from a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina, not of my own volition but because of the war, separated from my family and with only a plastic bag in my hands. When I got off the bus at 1.15 a.m., I was amazed to see people sleeping rough at the bus terminal. I was very grateful to be staying with my sister, who was studying in the city, and to continue my high-school education. **I had refugee status and therefore received support from**

various organisations that were working at the time to assist refugees and people in exile, of whom there were many in Zagreb. Although I was good at maths, I was offered free tuition because I was a refugee, so I asked whether a friend who wasn't good at maths could come to the classes with me. I explained that as I found it difficult to get around Zagreb, she could accompany me and we would study together.

It was never clear to me why we refugees got everything for free while my classmates had to pay, even though their need was sometimes greater than mine. Thanks to the civil society organisations that helped me at that time, I learnt a lot about activism, but also about the kinds of differences that make no sense. **I promised myself that I would work to increase support for young people, to provide them with opportunities and free assistance, and to create a welcoming space for them where they wouldn't be treated**

differently from each other. Ten years later, in 2005, myself and eight colleagues set up [ZAMISLI](https://zamisli.hr/)¹⁴ an educational association for young people with disabilities, which I chair down to the present day.

The aim of my association is to promote **high-quality education for young people with disabilities**, but in reality we are doing much more than that. Among other things, we provide **personal assistance** to people with disabilities, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. Through my work with this association, I have also come into contact with a large number of young, economically disadvantaged people, and on the basis of their talents and effort I have given them the opportunity to make the most of their work through employment.

14. Association ZAMISLI, <https://zamisli.hr/>

One of the projects we are proudest of is the **Zagreb Youth Centre**, which I set up in 2017 and which brought together 30 partners; this project received financial support from the European Union via the European Social Fund (ESF) between 18.5.2018 and 18.5.2020. Once the ESF funding ended, we managed to continue under the auspices of the City of Zagreb via a lump sum grant. This exceptional project has enabled me to achieve what I promised myself a long time ago: it offers **free materials to all young people**, and particularly materials that would cost them hundreds, if not thousands of kuna¹⁵ a month elsewhere.

As we are aware that all young people, regardless of wealth, must have equal **access to activities that help them make the most of their free time**, we have continued to work actively during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have respected the health measures put in place for physical spaces by developing alternative online activities. In spite of everything, **young people should not be deprived just because they are not as well off as their peers**. Via a range of **non-formal education opportunities**, we replace what is missing in the system - sensitivity towards those who do not

have everything they need and whose circumstances are different.

The Zagreb Youth Centre project fulfils one of the global Sustainable Development Goals – reducing inequalities – as it also directly tackles poverty. In fact, **only via a free, widespread and adequate supply of the resources necessary for a truly high-quality education can we help poor young people to be more competitive in the labour market** – in other words, to find a faster route out of poverty.

In addition to my own association's project, I would also like to mention

the association run by Mile Mrvalj. Mr Mrvalj is a former homeless person and founder of the Fajter humanitarian association. He survived three and a half years on the streets of Zagreb after moving there from Sarajevo. The aim of his association is to organise projects and humanitarian actions aimed at tackling unemployment and homelessness, and to unite the community in order to provide a better quality of life for homeless and socially vulnerable people in Croatia. By giving selflessly to anyone in need, having gone through the difficulties of homelessness himself, Mr Mrvalj has earned the right to be my alternate at the EESC.



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Financial and debt counselling – a vital component of a holistic approach to social action



Martin Salamon

Martin SALAMON (DK)
Chief Economist, Forbrugerrådet Tænk, the Danish Consumer Council

[Forbrugerrådet Tænk](#) (The Danish Consumer Council)¹⁶ promotes a balanced approach to consumer spending. An important part of its work is therefore to lend a hand to consumers who need help, and the best examples of how it goes about this can be seen in our seven debt-counselling centres around the country.

In February 2020, the Danish Consumer Council celebrated the tenth anniversary of its **financial and debt counselling service**, which in a very specific way helps preventing and reducing poverty in our country. 120 committed and competent volunteers, with experience drawn from around 20 000 counselling sessions, joined us for the occasion.

15. One euro is around 7.5 kuna.

16. Forbrugerrådet Tænk, the Danish Consumer Council, <https://taenk.dk>

Week after week, our numerous volunteers have provided counselling face-to-face and by telephone and email, **ensuring that vulnerable consumers receive prompt assistance**. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, we have also been offering online counselling. Thousands of people have gone from a situation of financial chaos to one where they have an overview of their spending and are back on track financially after receiving counselling from us.

A whole range of difficult feelings come to the fore when financial problems overshadow everything else. **Debt problems rarely occur in isolation**, and through our counselling we come into contact with people with mental health issues, vulnerable families, single mothers and people who are lonely, both young and old. What they all have in common is the fact that they have nowhere else to turn for help or advice, and it is only through volunteer financial and debt counselling that they can get assistance from completely independent advisers who meet them one-on-one and as equals. **Managing your budget can be an important step towards coping with other challenges**.

Over the course of its ten years, the Danish Consumer Council has also acted as a mouthpiece for this group of consumers who have fallen into debt. We have been on their side when it came to dealing with completely unfair terms in the credit market or the taboo of one's personal finances being in a mess. When necessary, we have made politicians and the public aware of the fact that, despite the favourable economic climate, there is still a sizeable group of people who are stuck in the debt trap and that modern society poses structural challenges concerning indebtedness.



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The importance of finance and debt counselling by volunteers as a component of a holistic approach to social action cannot be underestimated. Together with the other debt counselling organisations in Denmark, we therefore welcome the public sector funding to the tune of DKK 55 million¹⁷ that has been made available for this work over the next four years. We are looking forward to continuing and developing our initiatives in the coming period and hope that, in the long term, there will be an even more stable financial basis for action in support of socially vulnerable people and others whose lives have suddenly taken a disastrous turn for the worse.

The overall work of the Danish Consumer Council on financial and debt issues is providing fresh insight, something we are making use of to prevent people from becoming trapped in a debt spiral. We are **sharing the knowledge and experience** we acquire with the many organisations, authorities, politicians and researchers working, each in their own way, with people experiencing problems with their personal finances.

In 2019, the Danish Consumer Council's financial and debt counselling service, reluctantly set another new record, with a total of 3 187 counselling sessions. This represents a massive increase of 36% compared to 2018. The size of the figure indicates that there is still a huge and widespread need for advice.

In 2020, thanks to the Danish Tryg Foundation, we will be able to continue to visit educational institutions to **discuss personal finance with young people** and encourage them to talk to someone if they are in financial trouble. We are expanding our efforts, with a particular focus on young people who are psychologically vulnerable, the aim being to meet people earlier, before their debts have got completely out of hand.

Early, preventive action is needed so that the young people of tomorrow are better equipped to deal with a world where temptation in the form of quick loans and impulse purchases is just a few clicks away and their consumer habits can rapidly spin out of control.

17. Around EUR 7.39 million

Fighting poverty through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived

Bernd SCHLÜTER (DE)

Board Member, Federal Association of Non-Statutory Welfare Services (BAGFW)
Lawyer

The Federal Association of Non-statutory Welfare (BAGFW)¹⁸ is the collective voice of the six non-statutory welfare umbrella organisations in Germany: The Arbeiterwohlfahrt, the Deutsche Caritasverband, the Deutsche Rote Kreuz, the Deutsche Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband, the Diakonie Deutschland and the Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland: six organisations which are all based on different religions and beliefs, as well as secular and ethical foundations. They are the largest non-profit providers of social and health services in Germany and offer help and support in 118 623 institutions (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes, kindergartens), which comprise a total of 1 912 665 employees working full-time in non-statutory welfare. They **aim to improve the living conditions** of children, people with disabilities, the elderly, the homeless, the sick, migrants and other vulnerable groups. **BAGFW and its member organisations are social policy actors and advocates of the weak.**

Based on the Social Code books, the German social system is differentiated according to work capacity and other needs. BAGFW is committed to improving these systems, and its asso-



Bernd Schlüter @EESC

ciations and their members are themselves responsible for such facilities.

Through the **Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)**¹⁹, BAGFWs member organisations work in Germany with target groups that have no reasonable prospect of integration into the regular labour market. The aim of the **FEAD programme** is to give these people access to locally or regionally available assistance in order to stabilise them socially and thus improve the conditions for their **social inclusion**. Recently immigrated EU citizens, parents with young children, homeless persons and those who are at risk of homelessness are among the most vulnerable groups. These groups have to cope with particularly stressful situations because of their wide-ranging problems and complex deprivations. Their housing conditions are often detrimental, for example in overcrowded flats and houses which are not fit for living in. In addition, the lack of language skills and education hinders

their access to the regular labour market and increases their dependence on non-regular employment in often precarious conditions.

Interculturally sensitive and linguistically competent support is vital for communication with those seeking advice. Therefore, our organisations created **special guidance teams**. They visit the vulnerable groups and discuss with them their needs and how their problems can be solved. In most cases they are successful in providing them with the prerequisites to go further in, for example, their search on the labour market by referring them to other institutions. Newly immigrated EU citizens without children were, for example, most frequently referred to migration counselling centres and language courses. Another example is helping people with their health insurance claims or giving them referrals to emergency housing assistance. Those seeking advice were also frequently accompanied to municipal offices or referred to debt counselling.

In 2019, FEAD projects advised 90 740 adult EU citizens, including homeless EU citizens.

BAGFWs member organisations will continue, together with municipalities and institutions, to carry out their work in the FEAD projects. We believe that **FEAD is an important programme to combat poverty across the EU**, and thus helping to achieve the UN's first Sustainable Development Goal – no poverty. FEAD projects succeed in placing people in existing assistance services, thus opening up prospects for better provision of health services, emergency housing assistance, family support, migration services, language courses and other assistance.



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18. Federal Association of Non-statutory Welfare (BAGFW), <https://www.bagfw.de/>

19. Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), <https://europa.eu/!Ww63yW>

MEET OUR MEMBERS IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Louise Grabo is the new president of the EESC's Observatory of the Digital Transition and Single Market

Louise GRABO (SE)

Youth representative, National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU²⁰)
Secretary General, Swedish Fintech Association



Louise Grabo

Professional background:

I am the Secretary General of the [Swedish Fintech Association](#)²¹, an industry association for the fintech sector in Sweden. I have a bachelor's degree in European Studies and have worked in politics and in the fintech sector for the last few years. I'm also the newly elected president of an organisation for gender equality in Sweden.

Why I wanted to become president of the Digital Transition and Single Market Observatory:

Since this is a new [observatory](#)²² that includes topics such as the single market, as well as the digital transition, I think we have a chance to build up something new and play an important role in the EESC's work with these questions in the coming years.

For the last few years, I have been working in the tech sector, which is growing rapidly and can be the solution to many of the challenges we are facing in the EU today.

The Single Market is a competitive advantage for both SMEs and big companies in the EU, but we can still see fragmentation and challenges, especially when it comes to the Digital Single Market. For example, we still see the fragmentation on the Single Market for e-commerce, where similar products can vary from one country to another which means that it is not yet

an integrated market. This needs to be addressed and the EESC can make an important contribution to that.

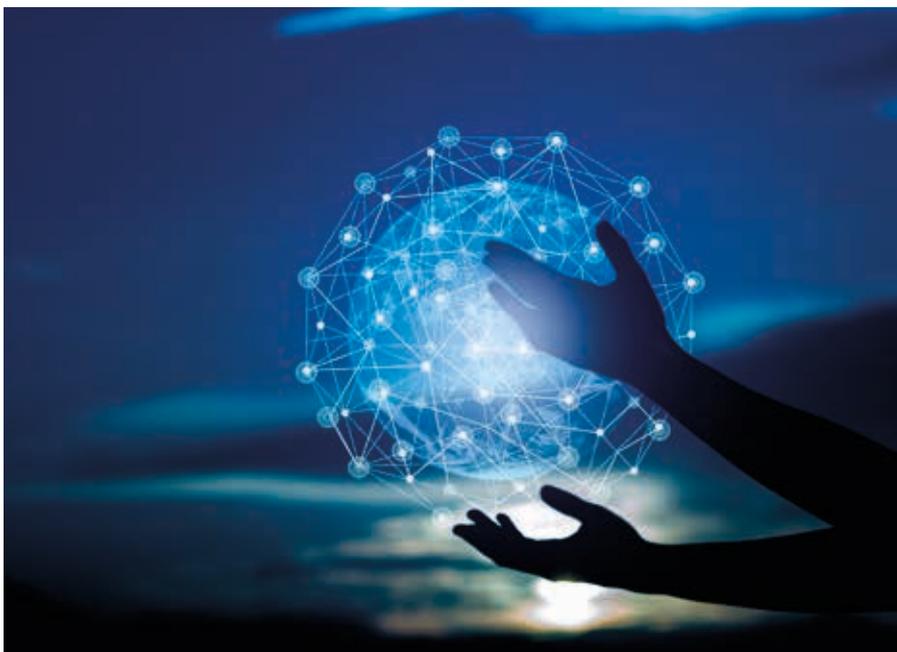
The digital single market needs to open up; data is the new gold and finding ways to share data in a secure and safe way can create innovation and new products and services to the benefit of everybody.

The priorities of my presidency include:

To stop the fragmentation of the Single Market and to enable the Digital Single Market to grow. Moreover, since the European Commission will be putting forward a new strategy for artificial intelligence (AI) in 2021, this will be an important topic for the observatory to follow up. We will also examine the risks that come with the digital transition, such as cybersecurity and how to democratise the transition so that no one is left behind.

What is my vision for the digital transition and the Single Market:

The digital transition and the Single Market are crucial for the EU to be competitive, to create new jobs and to overcome many of the challenges we are facing. The digital transition needs to be inclusive and must benefit everyone.



@ Philip Pilosian, Shutterstock

20. National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations, <https://lsu.se/>

21. Swedish Fintech Association, <https://www.swefintech.se/>

22. EESC Observatory of the Digital Transition and the Single Market, <https://europa.eu/vV99mU>

Ionuț Sibian is the new president of the EESC's Western Balkans Follow-up Committee

Ionuț SIBIAN (RO)

Vice-President, EESC REX Section
Executive Director, Civil Society Development Foundation
Chair, Federation of International Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs (FOND)
Team Europe Member



Ionuț Sibian @ EESC

Professional background:

I am the executive director of the Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC)²³, one of the most prominent NGOs in Romania. I have over 20 years of experience working in civil society, during which time I was a founding president of the Romanian Federation of Development NGOs (FOND) and a board member of the German Marshall Fund's Black Sea Trust, as well as a member of various boards of Romanian and European organisations. I currently serve as a member of the Orange Foundation Board.

Following Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, I was elected as one of the Romanian NGOs' representatives to the EESC. During my first two terms, I held several roles and responsibilities such as chair of the Joint Consultative Committees with [Montenegro](#)²⁴ and [Serbia](#)²⁵, and president of the [Western Balkans Follow-up Committee](#)²⁶, from 2012 to 2015.

I am the author of a significant number of EESC opinions in areas such as EU enlargement strategy, financial instruments for civil society, development cooperation, human rights and civil

society, including: [REX 533 - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#)²⁷, [REX/453 - EU Enlargement Strategy](#)²⁸ and [SOC/378 - Combating trafficking in human beings](#)²⁹.

With regard to my educational background, I hold a Master's degree in Southeast European studies (Balkan Studies) from the University of Athens, Greece, an EU-supported programme under the Stability Pact. In 2009, I was granted a Marshall Memorial Fellowship, by the German Marshall Fund of the US, Washington D.C.

Why I wanted to become president of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee:

Having graduated from the Faculty of History at the University of Bucharest, I have a passionate interest in the region and the closely interwoven historical ties between its nations. Given the shared historical path of these nations and Romania, I was astounded by the many missed opportunities for the Balkan region, due to the conflicts which tore it apart. Now the region sees a historical opportunity: being part of the larger European project. EU accession holds the promise of long-standing regional reconciliation and a chance to overcome the haunting historical troubles, which re-shaped the region and took too many lives. Through our work with civil society in these countries, within the framework of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, we will build the foundation for their future membership.

My presidency will be based on the following policy priorities and objectives:

- the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting **regional co-operation** and people-to-people relations – building bridges;



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- the state of social and civil dialogue and **enabling civic space** in the Western Balkans;
- **"Fundamentals"** (rule of law, fundamental rights, the fight against corruption, media freedom and economic reform programmes);
- the **role of CSOs in coping with the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis**;
- the contribution of civil society to the **Green Agenda and the sustainable development** of the Western Balkans;
- and setting up the **Joint Consultative Committees with Albania and North Macedonia**.

We will allow **particular focus** on monitoring the pandemic and post-pandemic responses in individual countries, where **safeguarding the position of civil society** and preserving democratic values in general could prove extremely challenging.

My vision:

With the accession of the Western Balkans countries, the European (EU) project would truly be accomplished.

23. Civil Society Development Foundation, <http://www.fdsc.ro/eng>

24. EESC EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee, <https://europa.eu/!Yv36UH>

25. EESC EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee, <https://europa.eu/!hb96PU>

26. EESC Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, <https://europa.eu/!jn74Kf>

27. EESC opinion REX 533 - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, <https://europa.eu/!RV73qg>

28. EESC opinion REX/453 - EU Enlargement Strategy, <https://europa.eu/!yp67pb>

29. EESC opinion SOC/378 - Combating trafficking in human beings, <https://europa.eu/!dB76bQ>

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

Everyone has the power to transform the landscape for disabled people

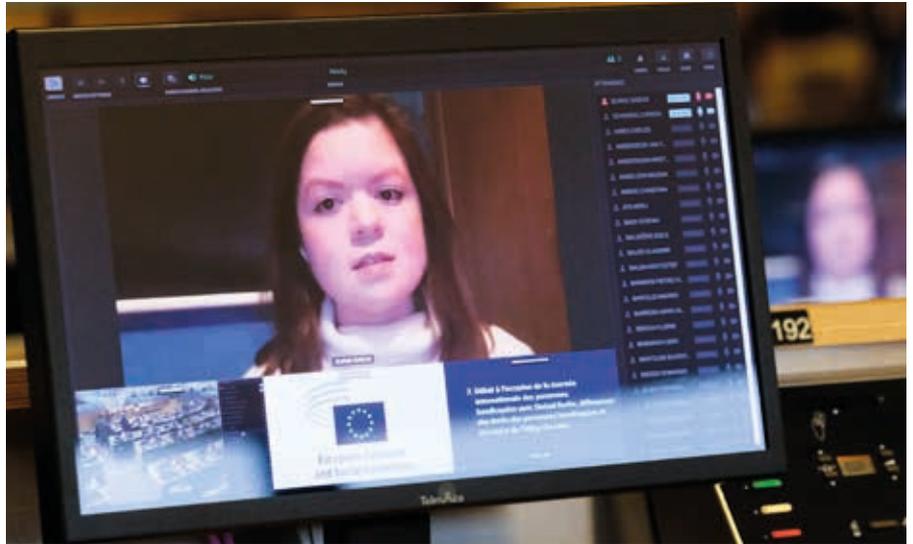
Debate on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities with disability advocate Sinéad Burke

To mark the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** dedicated the first part of its plenary session in December 2020 to an exchange of views with the Irish writer, academic, activist and broadcaster **Sinéad Burke**. The debate was opened by the EESC president **Christa Schweng** and included, amongst other speakers, contributions from Diversity Europe Group members **Cillian Lohan**, **Pietro Vittorio Barbieri**, **Ioannis Vardakastanis** and **Diana Indjova**.



Cillian Lohan @ EESC

The EESC president highlighted the importance of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)**, which was adopted in 2006 and is considered a milestone for the disability rights movement. “The approach taken by the UN CPRD was revolutionary and represented a big step forward”, said **Christa Schweng**. “Unfortunately, the situation is still difficult and further measures are needed³⁰.”



Sinéad Burke @ EESC

Sinéad Burke’s speech echoed these introductory remarks and incorporated numerous elements from her personal experience as a teacher and person with a disability. The disability advocate denounced the medical model of disability, in which persons with disabilities are classified by their medical conditions. In her speech, Ms Burke also highlighted the **need to consider disability as a rights-or justice-based issue**, distancing herself from the “charitable approach” which, in her words, “makes the active inclusion [of people with disabilities] rooted in generosity rather than in equity, rights and justice”.

“The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, **Ms Burke** continued, “guarantees a disabled person’s right to dignity, to education and to participation in the decision-making process, particularly in issues concerning them.” The EU and its Member States have signed and ratified the [Convention](#)³¹, but the [optional protocol](#)³², which notably allows individuals to petition a [Committee of experts](#)³³ when their rights have been violated,

has to this day not been confirmed by all parties, including the EU and some of its Member States.

According to **Ms Burke**, legislation is still all too often created without tak-



Pietro Barbieri @ EESC

30. EESC (03/12/2020), “EESC gives the floor to prominent Irish disability advocate Sinéad Burke”, Press release, <https://europa.eu/IPB78XG>

31. United Nations, “15. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15&chapter=4&clang=en#EndDec (as of 18/12/20)

32. United Nations, “15.a Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15-a&chapter=4&clang=en (as of 18/12/20)

33. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/CRPDIndex.aspx>

ing into account the concerns of persons with disabilities. The writer and activist also underlined the high rate of unemployment amongst persons with disabilities and called on EESC Members to take **further action**: “The Committee does an incredible job in ensuring that disabled voices are central to so many conversations and decisions, but we continuously need more. We need to create legislation in collaboration”. Addressing the plenary, **Ms Burke** added: “Each of you, as individuals and as a collective, has the power to transform the landscape for disabled people. And I ask you **to do this with them, not for them.**”

The EESC vice-president for communication, **Cillian Lohan**, thanked **Ms Burke** for using her “natural story-telling ability to deliver such a powerful and inspiring speech [...] and for pushing us to continue to work on these issues”.

Mr Barbieri questioned the language of vulnerability used by the European institutions to describe persons with disabilities. The vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group and chair of the EESC’s [thematic study group on disability rights](#)³⁴ said that “vulnerable people are excluded, marginalised and sidelined, but they are

not fragile”. In this context, he mentioned the situation of people living in care homes and whose health has in many cases not been protected during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Vardakastanis, who is not only vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group but also president of the European Disability Forum, dedicated his statement to those who have suffered disproportionately from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, also mentioning people with disabilities living in residential institutions and families who have lost their loved ones. In light of this situation, he **suggested prioritising people with disabilities in vaccination programmes against COVID-19.**

Ms Indjova was the last Diversity Europe Group Member to take the floor. Ms Indjova, who represents the Global Disability Movement at the EESC, stressed the need to think about the **rights of people whose disabilities are less visible** and to work on the **integration of people with mental disabilities.**

The exchange with disability advocate Sinéad Burke was followed by a **plenary debate on EESC opinion SOC/638**, [“The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabili-](#)



Krzysztof Pater @ EESC

[ties to vote in European Parliament elections](#)³⁵”, which had been prepared by Diversity Europe Group Member **Krzysztof Pater** and was unanimously adopted.

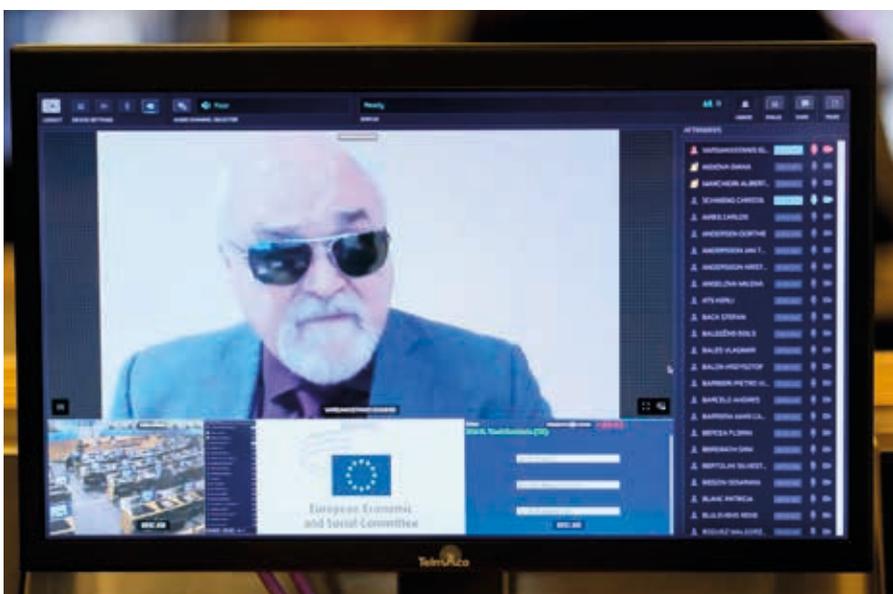
In addition to these debates, the EESC marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities by closing its December plenary session with the **screening of the short film “To be and not to be (in times of Corona)”**. The performance shown in this film was produced for the EESC by the Belgium-based theatre company Theater Stap!. The company creates performances in which actors with mental disabilities take centre stage. The short film presented at the EESC plenary session highlights the struggles of artists with disabilities in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and can be watched [online](#).

The **International Day of Persons with Disabilities is observed on 3 December**. According to the [United Nations](#), this day “aims to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and development, and to increase awareness of the situation of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life”³⁶. The UN General Assembly proclaimed the observance of the Day in 1992.

34. EESC opinion SOC/638 - The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections, <https://europa.eu/!Mu93Mk>

35. EESC Media Library (03/12/20), “To Be and Not to Be (in times of Corona)”, <https://europa.eu/lwj97mC>

36. United Nations, “International Day of Persons with Disabilities, 3 December”, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/day-of-persons-with-disabilities>



Ioannis Vardakastanis @ EESC

Making Europe fit for the digital age and the digital age fit for Europe and the world

Members debate with Executive Vice-President Vestager on A Europe Fit for the Digital Age

On 3 December, European Commission Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager joined the EESC plenary for a **debate on A Europe Fit for the Digital Age**. With the Commission about to publish the [Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act](#)³⁷ on 15 December, the debate was an opportunity for Members to express civil society's wishes and concerns regarding the digital transition. The two legislative initiatives are intended to address the challenges that have surfaced with digital developments and ensure that users, consumers and businesses continue to benefit from digital developments.

In her opening statement, **Ms Vestager** explained that both initiatives would help Europe catch up with the last twenty years of digital development, defining how digital services should be provided and how digital markets work.

"The Digital Services Act will **make sure that digital service provid-**



Margrethe Vestager @ EESC

ers take responsibility and are accountable for the services they provide and that trust can be rebuilt," **Ms Vestager** said. The Digital Market Act would define do's and don'ts for big companies that assumed a gatekeeper position. These should ensure fair competition and that markets "serve consumers in the best possible manner".

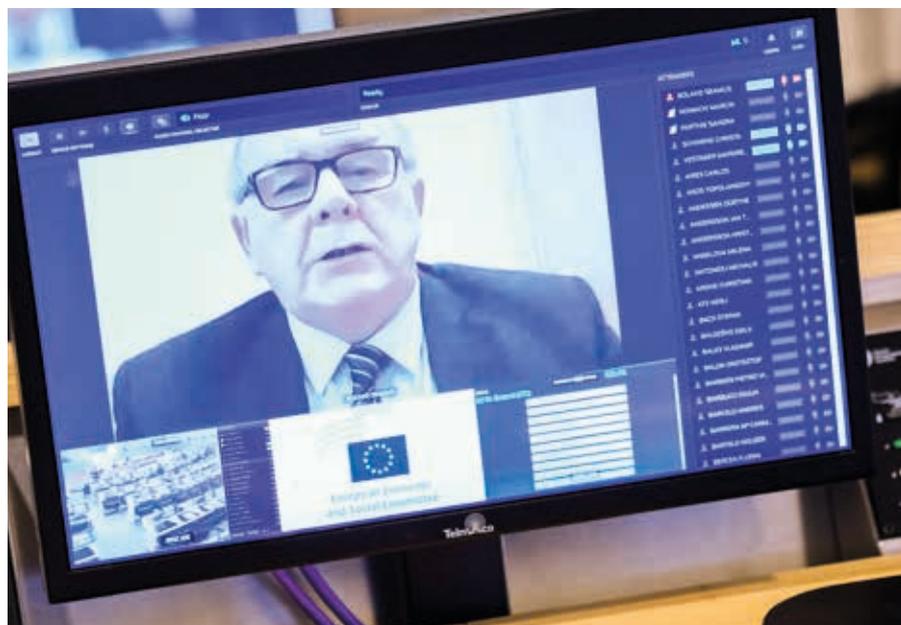
Ms Vestager also outlined the key elements of the Commission's digital strategy, its focus on leveraging private investment, its reliance on flagship initiatives (on digital skills, digital

public services and cybersecurity), and the building and deployment of digital capacity.

Speaking in the general debate, the president of the Diversity Europe Group, **Séamus Boland**, welcomed the Commission's focus on strengthening digital skills. This would be crucial to **guarantee that no one was left behind** and that everybody could enjoy the advantages of the digital transition. **Mr Boland** stressed that "digitalisation must be completed in a way that is fair and that brings everybody with it" and expressed his firm belief that Europe will successfully manage the transition into the digital age, if it builds on its strengths and values.

"Eyes are on Europe to lead the way, so that EU regulations become the global standard. So it is not just about making 'Europe fit for the digital age'. It is also about making the 'digital age fit for Europe and the world,'" **Mr Boland** said, underlining the need for a digital age based on democratic values.

Rudolf Kolbe, vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group, raised two points with regard to SMEs and the



Séamus Boland @ EESC

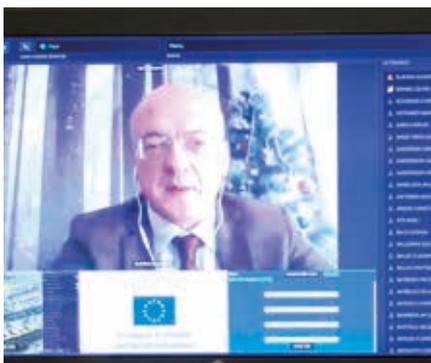
37. European Commission, Digital Services Act and Digital Market Act, <https://europa.eu/!Xv69vp>

services sector. First, he urged the European Commission to address the **urban-rural gap in access to broadband**. “The gap causes considerable problems for the competitiveness of SMEs in rural areas and other rural structures,” he said. Second, **Mr Kolbe** recommended legally entrenching the hitherto non-binding guidelines of the high-level expert group for the Commission’s AI strategy. In his view, this would increase consumers’ trust in the respective services.

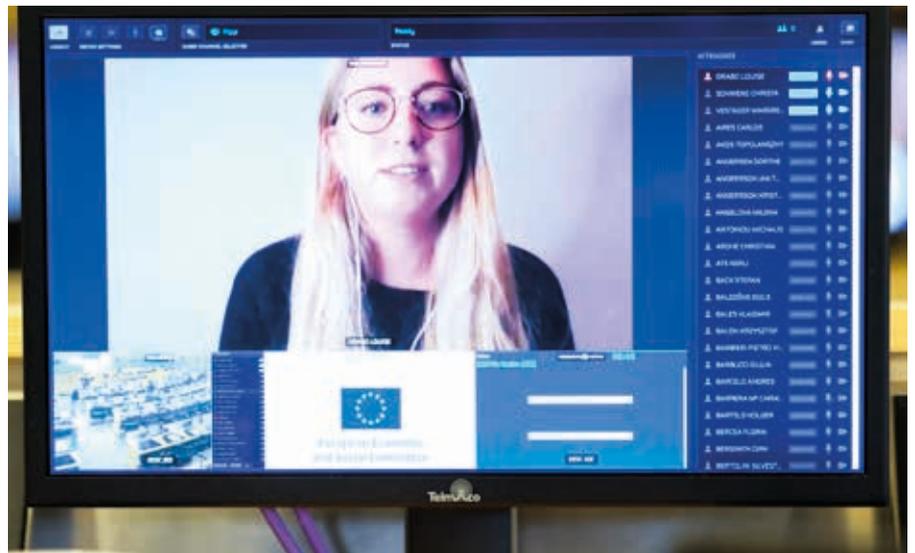


Rudolf Kolbe @ EESC

Diversity Europe Group Member **Giuseppe Guerini** took the floor to highlight that digitalisation affected every aspect of life, including the quality of institutions and democracy. In his view, **social economy businesses** could contribute to developing a democratic and inclusive digital economy where economic activities would not be limited to a digital elite. **Mr Guerini** stressed that the digital and green transitions would go hand in hand and needed a strong social dimension: “We will not have a new green deal, unless we have a digital and social new green deal”.



Giuseppe Guerini @ EESC



Louise Grabo @ EESC

Louise Grabo was the final Member of the Diversity Europe Group to speak in the plenary debate. The president of the [EESC Observatory of the Digital Transition and the Single Market](https://eesc.europa.eu/en/observatory-of-the-digital-transition-and-the-single-market)³⁸ noted in her questions to Margrethe Vestager that **regulating the digital economy and strengthening Europe’s competitiveness in the digital market** were equally important. **Ms Grabo** urged the European

Commission to come forward with proposals that enable European tech companies to grow and to compete with American and Chinese companies and that strengthen digital skills in Europe so that start-ups and SMEs can find a skilled workforce and drive innovation in Europe.

The complete debate is available online at <https://fb.watch/2pIkV3x58i/>.



Plenary session @ EESC

38. EESC Observatory of the Digital Transition and the Single Market, <https://europa.eu/vV99mU>

NEWS FROM THE DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP

The Consumers and Environment Category resumes its work



Spokesperson Bernardo Hernández Bataller @ EESC



Spokesperson Thierry Libaert @ EESC

Following the start of the EESC's new term of office (2020-2025) in October 2020, the **first (inaugural) meeting** of the [Consumers and Environment Category](#)³⁹ took place on the morning of 17 December 2020. **Bernardo Hernández Bataller** (Association of Communication Users [[AUC](#)]⁴⁰ and the Consumers' and Users' Council [[CCU](#)] from Spain⁴¹) and **Thierry Libaert** ([Nicolas Hulot Foundation](#)⁴²) were elected as spokespersons.

The category consists of **17 Members**, 7 representatives of environmental organisations and 10 representatives of consumer organisations.

After a *tour de table* where Members had the opportunity to introduce themselves, Marie-Laurence Drillon, the administrator in charge of Consumers for the secretariat of the EESC Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption ([INT section](#)⁴³), made a short speech on the **European Consumer Day**. Following that a debate was held to determine the category's **position on the 2021 edition** of the event. Members wanted, among other things, to:

- focus on the impact of COVID-19 on consumers and a possible opportunity to move towards sustainable consumption;
- discuss how to adopt more sustainable solutions;
- see how the consumption angle could give environmental actions more credibility;
- look at digitally vulnerable consumers and other new challenges that consumers face.

The meeting continued with a **discussion on the category's work programme** for the next half-term (2020-2023). The category wants to focus on the need to move towards more sustainable consumption, raising consumer awareness of the green transition and product safety. Other focus points include the growing link between consumption and the [European Green Deal](#)⁴⁴, the need to pay attention to digitalisation, greenwashing and the link with advertising and marketing and sustainable finance.

"The category must be more than simply a forum to discuss opinions on consumption or protecting the environment: we must constantly strive to address key environmental and consumer issues," said **Mr Libaert**.

The category decided to meet again at 30/03/2021.

39. EESC Consumer and Environment Category, <https://europa.eu/!Nf36rW>

40. Association of Communication Users (AUC), <https://www.auc.es/>

41. Consumers' and Users' Council (CCU) from Spain, <http://www.consumo-ccu.es/>

42. Nicolas Hulot Foundation, <https://www.fondation-nicolas-hulot.org/>

43. EESC INT Section, <https://europa.eu/!pK46ky>

44. European Commission, European Green Deal, <https://europa.eu/!Tr74bn>

The Social Economy Category in the limelight: showcasing the past and looking to the future

On 17 December the third and final meeting of the [Social Economy Category](#)⁴⁵ of the EESC in 2020 took place, bringing to a close the five years during which Messieurs Balon and Coheur had been co-Spokespersons of the Category. It was thus fitting that the co-Spokespersons reflected on the **role and successes of the Category** over these years, as well as on the **future challenges for the sector**. It should be noted that with the recent dissolution of the study group on Social Economy Enterprises of the [EESC's INT Section](#)⁴⁶, the Social Economy Category has now become the sole forum bringing together the multiple actors of this sector, within the Committee.

The meeting of 17 December also provided the opportunity to elect the **new Spokesperson** of the Category, **Mr Guerini (IT)**, who is president of [Cecop-Cicopa Europ](#)⁴⁷. Mr Guerini will carry out his functions for the next 2.5 years, until the mid-term renewal of the EESC.

A lively exchange of views on the **upcoming priorities and activities** of the social economy was also held with **Ms Toia**, co-Chair of the Social Economy Intergroup of the European Parliament (S & D, IT) and with **Ms Engelmann**, Head of the Unit 'Advanced Technology, Clusters, Social Economy and Entrepreneurship', within the European Commission's DG GROWTH.



Spokesperson Giuseppe Guerini @ EESC



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UPCOMING EVENTS

29/03/2021 – Meeting of the Farmers Category

30/03/2021 – Meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category

45. EESC Social Economy Category, <https://europa.eu/!ht47UK>

46. EESC INT Section, <https://europa.eu/!pK46ky>

47. Cecop-Cicopa Europe, <https://cecop.coop/>

DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Priorities for creating a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable world post COVID-19

PhD Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES)

*Member of the Board of Directors and President of the International Relations Commission, Spanish Confederation of Social Enterprises (CEPES)
Director of Alliances and Social and International Relations, Fundación ONCE*



@ UN

On 4 December 2020, our Member and EESC observer in the United Nations Inter-agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSE), **Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna**, took part in the panel discussion on **Action Towards a Disability-Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable Post-COVID-19 World**. Organised by stakeholders and marking the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities, commemorated each year on 3 December, the online discussion was a side event at the UN Thirteenth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([COSP13](#))⁴⁸.

As an observer, **Mr Cabra de Luna** had the chance to comment on the

presentations during the Q&A session. “COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities faced by people with disabilities. Any new strategy, be it at UN, EU or national level, should adapt to the new reality and provide **proportionate funds and resources**,” he said, referring to the preparations for the new European Disability Strategy for 2021-2030.

Subsequently, **Mr Cabra de Luna** highlighted the need for a large part of recovery funding, including from the EU Recovery Fund, to be dedicated to making sure no-one is left behind, particularly disfavoured groups and especially people with disabilities. “Recovery funding is something which is at the top of the European disability movement advocacy agenda and it is

in my view an indispensable tool,” he said.

Women with disabilities face double and sometimes triple discrimination, which according to **Mr Cabra de Luna** needs to be addressed systematically with specific, targeted measures, as the EESC has highlighted in a range of publications.

Another key element is, in **Mr Cabra de Luna’s** view, **civil society involvement in policymaking**. “The necessary interlocution and consultation platforms involving people with disabilities need to be created at all levels. They need to be sustained over time and create ongoing communication channels through which people with disabilities can actively contribute to policymaking.”

Mr Cabra de Luna ended by saying that the social and solidarity economy sector could play an important role in promoting disability mainstreaming across all areas and sectors.

Mr Cabra de Luna’s [speech](#) is available online⁴⁹.

A recording of the panel discussion is available at: https://youtu.be/w76_Z30frAY



PhD Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna (upper middle) @ UN

48. UN, Thirteenth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/conference-of-states-parties-to-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2/cosp13.html>

49. Speech Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna, 04/12/2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/ed_emp/---emp_ent/---coop/documents/genericdocument/wcms_763765.pdf

The perspectives of civil society and social economy representatives on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Alain COHEUR (BE)

President, EESC INT Section
Director of European and International
Affairs, Solidaritas Mutual Health Funds (UNMS)

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)

Spokesperson, EESC Social Economy Category
President, Cecop-Cicopa Europe,
European confederation of industrial
and service cooperatives
Board Member, Confcooperative,
Confederation of Italian Cooperatives
President, Confcooperative Bergamo

On 11 December, the coalition [ACT 4 SOCIAL EU](#)⁵⁰ and the mutual health and social protection Group [VYV](#)⁵¹ hosted an **online seminar** on the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. The webinar brought together different stakeholders and policy makers in the field of the social and solidarity economy and notably featured an address by the French Secretary of State with responsibility for a Social, Solidarity and Responsible Economy, Olivia Grégoire.

Our Members **Giuseppe Guerini** and **Alain Coheur** were invited to speak during the first session of the webinar, which was dedicated to the perspectives of civil society on **the European Pillar of Social Rights**. Other speakers were H el ene Fauvel and Dominique Joseph, both members of the French Economic Social and Environmental Council.



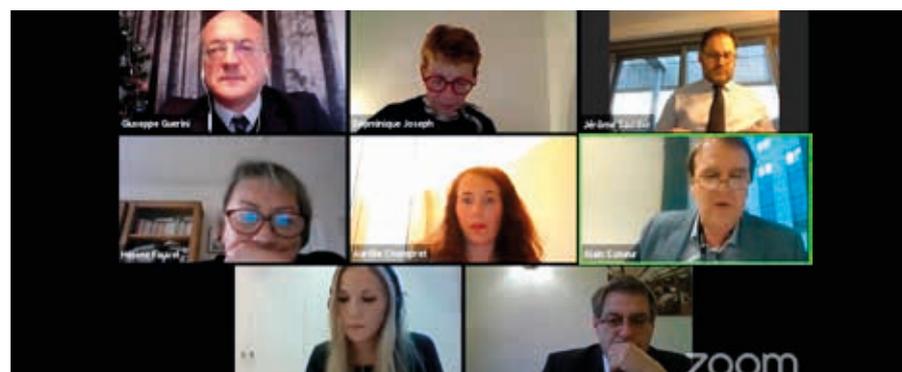
@ Coalition ACT 4 SOCIAL EU

Mr Guerini welcomed the timely organisation of this webinar, ahead of a year with many events that could, in his words, “affect the construction of a more social Europe.”⁵² The newly elected spokesperson of the EESC Social Economy Category for the term 2020-2023, who has drafted several opinions on the social economy and the response to COVID-19⁵³, said that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that **health and social services are essential public goods**, which support the functioning of the economy. In this context, and ahead of the Social Summit to be organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union in May 2021, **Mr Guerini** stressed that the **green and digital transformations in Europe must be accompanied by an ambitious budgetary proposal for a “social**

deal” which would be “committed to reducing inequalities, promoting greater inclusion [...] and defending the weakest part of our society”

Mr Coheur dedicated his statement to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our societies and on the role of the European Union. According to our Member, the pandemic has revealed how important our **health systems** are, but also how much they **have suffered from austerity policies and budget cuts**. However, instead of giving in to national reflexes, European Member States should adopt a **holistic approach and more concerted action in the fields of health and social protection**. “The EU requires [...] a strengthened political project with health and social protection at its foundation,” he added.

More information about the webinar can be found [here](#)⁵⁴.



@ Coalition ACT 4 SOCIAL EU

50. ESS France (08/12/2020), “11 DECEMBRE ACT 4 SOCIAL EU : SOCLE EUROPEEN, DONNER UNE VOIX AUX ACTEURS DE LA SOLIDARITE!”, <https://ess-france.org/fr/actualites/11-decembre-act-4-social-eu-socle-europeen-donner-une-voix-aux-acteurs-de-la-solidarite>

51. Groupe VYV, <https://www.groupe-vyv.fr/>

52. Own translations (from French).

53. Cf. EESC Document Search, <https://dmsearch.eesc.europa.eu/search/opinion> (22/12/20)

54. ESS France (08/12/2020), “11 DECEMBRE ACT 4 SOCIAL EU : SOCLE EUROPEEN, DONNER UNE VOIX AUX ACTEURS DE LA SOLIDARITE!”, <https://ess-france.org/fr/actualites/11-decembre-act-4-social-eu-socle-europeen-donner-une-voix-aux-acteurs-de-la-solidarite>

From climate communication to behaviour change

Cillian LOHAN (IE)

EESC Vice-President for Communication, CEO, Green Economy Foundation, nominated by the Irish Environmental Pillar

On 8 December 2020, our Member and EESC vice-president for Communication, **Cillian Lohan**, spoke at the **11th European public communication conference EuroPCom**⁵⁵, which was organised jointly by the EU institutions on 7-8 December. The online event on **Time for Communicat[i]on** brought together communication experts to reflect on the major issues around the three key conference themes: Citizens, Green and Digital.



@CoR

Cillian Lohan participated in the workshop **From climate communication to behavioural change** with Professor Phoebe Koundouri, president of the European Association of Environmental and Natural Resource Economists, and Thomas Froimovici, head of the Web content unit at the European Investment Bank. The experts explored how communication on climate change and “green” measures can make a difference, fostering behavioural change and stimulating the intended impact.

In his address, **Mr Lohan** raised various **aspects for successful climate communication**. As a good example that could be followed by the public



Cillian Lohan (top, right) @ EESC

sector, he mentioned civil society – especially young people’s – climate mobilisation. Thanks to the innovative approach taken, its message has continued to be delivered despite the current pandemic.

Mr Lohan further called for changes in **climate governance**, including a shift to the participatory model at all levels of scale. “A **collective narrative** needs to be created that values every action by all sectors and players. The active participation of all parts of society and the relevant organisations is crucial for the transition to climate neutrality. An enabling environment requires a clear shift from mere consultation and top-down engagement to co-design, co-creation and empowerment.” Mr Lohan also said that climate communication has to **put people at its centre and follow a vision** for the future rather than focusing on disaster scenarios and negative effects.

Another prerequisite for behaviour change is to create a desire for change in those whose engagement is key for the success of the overall endeavour. However, to be successful, climate communication needs to make it clear

that the private and public sectors have to take responsibility.

Finally, **Mr Lohan** called for a cultural change **going beyond the status quo** and its systems and structures and a purely economic approach. He said: “The sustainable development model requires us to treat the environment and the societal or community aspects of climate change as equally important, and that requires a complete shift in how we design the solutions.”

Asked for his reasons for hope regarding behaviour change, **Mr Lohan** mentioned previous examples of societal changes, the overall unified response to the COVID-19 pandemic and developments in the circular economy.

A recording of the workshop is available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/europcom/pages/live.aspx#15>

55. Committee of the Region, EuroPCom, <https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/europcom.aspx>



15 years of ECC-Net: “Helping EU consumers make the most of their rights”

Bogomil NIKOLOV (BG)

Executive Director, Bulgarian Active Consumers Association

On 20 November, our Member **Bogomil Nikolov** took part in an online conference organised by the European Consumer Centres Network ([ECC-Net](#)⁵⁶). The event was held on the occasion of **ECC-Net’s 15th anniversary** and focused on the **New Consumer Agenda**⁵⁷, which was launched by the European Commission in November 2020 and sets out the priorities for consumer policy for the next five years.

In addition to a Q&A session with the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, the event also featured a panel discussion on the topic of **“Helping EU consumers make the most of their rights”**, which brought together different experts working in the field of consumer policy, including our Member Mr Nikolov. Other participants were **Monique Goyens** (BEUC), **Anna Ekegren** (ECC Sweden) and **Rainer Ettel** (German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection).



Bogomil Nikolov (at the bottom, middle) @EESC

When asked how to “motivate sustainable behaviours amongst consumers”, **Mr Nikolov** noted that **consumers may lead the way but should not bear the sole responsibility** of the shift towards sustainable consumption. This was also supported by other participants. Taking shark-fin soup as an example, Mr Nikolov explained how certain habits can become less popular as soon as information on their ecological damage becomes known, but that they do not fully disappear unless policy measures are taken. Thinking about the next five years, he expressed his wish to see more sus-

tainable consumption and explained that consumers could be incentivised by **using tools such as taxation measures to create more favourable conditions for sustainable behaviours**.

A recording of the conference is available [online](#)⁵⁸.



Bogomil Nikolov @EESC

56. ECC-Net, <https://www.eccnet.eu/>

57. European Commission, New Consumer Agenda, <https://europa.eu/!wv34DC>

58. YouTube, Helping EU consumers make the most of their rights, <https://youtu.be/n6NCUqUyHbo>

OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK BY DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP MEMBERS

The last EESC plenary session took place from 2 to 3 December, in a hybrid format with some Members present on the EESC premises and others connecting remotely. The EESC plenary adopted 12 opinions, 4 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. The main points of these opinions can be found below.

SOC/638 - The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections (additional own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: Krzysztof PATER (PL)
*Vice-President, EESC Labour Market Observatory
President, National Scout and Guide Court, Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHP)*

The EESC:

- In each of the 27 EU countries, there are rules or organisational arrangements that deprive some voters with disabilities of the possibility of participating in EP elections.
- The EESC considers this unacceptable and contrary to the fundamental values of the EU and the provisions of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). It is also contrary to many international legal and political acts, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the recommendations of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers.
- The EESC calls on the EP, the European Council and Member States to urgently amend the 1976 Electoral Act by clarifying the principles of universality, directness and secre-

cy of elections, which would make it possible to implement standards throughout the EU that would guarantee real voting rights for persons with disabilities, in accordance with Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

NAT/799 - Fisheries – transposition of IATTC measures

Rapporteur working alone: Javier GARAT PEREZ (ES)
*Secretary-General, Spanish Fishing Confederation (CEPESCA)
President, Européche, European organisation of ship-owners, fishermen and employers*

The EESC:

- The EESC is of the view that control, conservation and management measures adopted by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) need to be transposed into EU law, the aim being to ensure that they are uniformly and effectively implemented within the EU. The transposition should adhere strictly to what has been agreed in the IATTC, without imposing any new obligations on European vessels. The Committee therefore supports the proposal for a regulation.
- However, the Committee recommends taking into account the considerations it set out in its opinion on *Conservation and enforcement measures in the area of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO)*⁵⁹.
- In the EESC's view, therefore, the proposal presented does not establish an efficient mechanism for transposing IATTC rules and does not resolve the issue of needing to update them every year.

SOC/643 - Public services principles for stability of democratic order (Exploratory opinion requested by the German presidency)

Rapporteur: Christian MOOS (DE)
*President, EESC EU-Transatlantic Relations Follow-Up Committee
Divisional Director, European and International Affairs, German Civil Servants Association (dbb)
Secretary-General, Europa-Union Germany
Board Member, European Movement Germany (EBD)*

The EESC:

- The German presidency of the Council of the EU has asked the EESC to give its opinion on the principles that must apply to EU Member States' public services in order to guarantee the core fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law, and on the conditions under which these principles act as automatic stabilisers of democracy and the rule of law in times of crisis.
- For more than a decade, the EU has faced severe crises, including the fight against terrorism, the global financial debt and economic crises, the crisis in the Common European Asylum System, the environmental and climate crisis, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective public services play a crucial role in mastering crises, guaranteeing public safety and security of supply by providing access to their services based on the principle of equal access and guaranteed universality.
- Based on a state of emergency, it was temporarily necessary to curtail fundamental rights in some of these exceptional crisis situations. To guarantee that such measures are justified and proportional, public services face the challenge



of balancing interference in fundamental rights and enforcement of the rule of law and ensuring the legality of all administrative action.

SOC/658 - EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs 2021-2025

Rapporteur-general:
Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU)
President, Federation of Hungarian Drugtherapeutic Institutes (Madrisz)

The EESC:

- On 24 July 2020, the European Commission published its new Security Union Strategy for 2020 to 2025, of which the agenda on drugs is one element. The EESC takes the view that, in its current form, this agenda is a clear step backwards, and abandons the consensual, balanced and evidence-based approach previously taken to the fight against drugs, which had been evaluated positively.
- The EESC welcomes the decision taken by the European Council's Horizontal Working Party on Drugs, at its meeting on 28 September, to ask the German Presidency of the Council to recast, by December, the document drawn up by the European Commission. The EESC strongly believes that the technical approach and public policies that formed the consensual basis for the previous EU drugs strategy must be continued and further strengthened in the 10th such strategy.
- The EESC recommends that the new drugs strategy and the new EU action plan(s) in this field should significantly improve the balance between demand reduction and harm reduction interventions in terms of both the number of strategic interventions and the allocation of resources.

The **complete texts** of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's [website](#)⁶⁰.

The **next EESC plenary sessions** will take place on 27 and 28 January and 24 and 25 February. They will be most likely hybrid meetings. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our [website](#)⁶¹.

DIVERSITY EUROPE GROUP MEMBERS WORKING ON NEW EESC OPINIONS

Rudolf KOLBE (AT) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Action plan on intellectual property” – [INT/927](#)

Martin SCHAFFENRATH (AT) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “A pharmaceutical strategy for Europe” – [INT/926](#)

Krzysztof BALON (PL) is president of the study group for the opinion on “Digital Markets Act” – [INT/928](#)

João Diogo DE CASTRO NABAIS DOS SANTOS (PT) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Communication on the digitalisation of the justice systems” – [INT/932](#)

Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU) is the president of the study group for the opinion on “Cross-border e-Justice in Europe” – [INT/931](#)

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025” – [SOC/666](#)

Christian MOOS (DE) is the president of the study group for the opinion on “Asylum and migration management regulation and crisis and force majeure regulation” – [SOC/669](#)

Krzysztof BALON (PL) is the president of the study group for the opinion on “Adequate minimum wages directive” – [SOC/664](#)

Ionuț SIBIAN (RO) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025” – [SOC/667](#)

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Building a European Health Union” – [SOC/665](#)

Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU) is the president of the study group for the opinion on «Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027» – [SOC/668](#)

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Screening regulation, amended proposal revising the asylum procedures regulation and the amended proposal revising the Eurodac regulation” – [SOC/670](#)

Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT) is rapporteur for the opinion on “Tackling non-performing loans in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic” – [ECO/540](#)

Lutz RIBBE (DE) is rapporteur-general for the opinion on “Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030” – [NAT/811](#)

Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ (HR) is the co-rapporteur for the opinion on “Evaluation – 2011 White Paper on Transport” – [TEN/728](#)

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO) is rapporteur for the opinion on “Media and Audiovisual Action Plan” – [TEN/731](#)

Maurizio MENSI (IT) is rapporteur for the opinion on “Security of network and information systems” – [TEN/730](#)

Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ (HR) is president of the study group for the opinion on “Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility” – [TEN/729](#)

Cillian LOHAN (IE) is president of the study group for the opinion on “Sustainability requirements for batteries in the EU” – [CCMI/178](#)

Rudolf KOLBE (AT) is the rapporteur for the opinion on “Liberal Professions 4.0” – [INT/904](#)



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