THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT
In 2007, I was honoured to be asked to be a member of Ireland's first Press Council. The experience, which I enjoyed for seven years, introduced me to the many issues, which surround the concept of press freedom as a fundamental right. Ireland is not different than most EU Member States, in that it holds dear the right of citizens to live in a society that values the right of having a free press.

A right, which is integral to a fully functional democracy. Indeed, without full and transparent press independence, countries cannot truly be judged as places where all other human rights are respected.

It is useful to note that as of now many journalists are treated badly, to the point where they are treated like criminals and in some cases have lost their lives. Such treatment breaches a whole raft of international law and must strenuously be opposed by all EU members and nations which believe in freedom. As the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, Article 11, point 2 states: "The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected".

Of course the media also has responsibilities. Citizens, who feel that the media has been unfair to them, must also have rights. In Europe it is heartening to know that 31 countries have properly regulated press councils. Their European organisation, the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE), is a “network of independent content regulators for both press and broadcast media. European Councils are full members; non-European Councils are associate members”.

The press councils’ role is one that should be strengthened and supported by the EU. Their success is grounded in the need to instil the utmost confidence of citizens that the media is also regulated and is compliant with the highest standard.

The EU must also recognise the inherent threat to content based media or traditional media. The threat comes in two parts. In the first instance, content based media are not and should not be bound by the instant need to publish without checking accuracy and truth as a priority. Secondly, the monetization of digitally sourced information narrows enormously the type of content published, often reducing it to a basic common denominator. The management of this threat is key to ensuring that the press freedom, so valued as a protector of democracy, is accepted by all citizens, is trustworthy, credible and accurate.

In the June issue of our newsletter, read guest articles by REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS and the IEP senior researcher Julian Plottka, an interview with EURACTIV journalist Vlagyiszlav Makszimov and articles by our Members on their work and views related to the freedom of press.
OP-ED

Press freedom: EU struggles to defend values at home

Pauline ADÈS-MÉVEL
Spokesperson, REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

The 2021 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) shows that Europe continues to be the most favourable continent for press freedom but violence against journalists has increased, and the mechanisms the European Union established to protect fundamental freedoms have yet to halt the draconian measures being taken in several central European countries.

The entire European continent has been fully engaged in combating the COVID-19 pandemic but not all countries can claim to have defended press freedom with the same energy.

In both the east and west of the continent, new legislation limiting the right to inform has facilitated arrests of journalists (Serbia and Kosovo) while several countries have tried to limit the impact of information on sensitive subjects including the pandemic, such as Hungary which put in place an emergency legislation in force to criminalise “fake news” about the coronavirus since March 2020. Migration has also proved to be a sensitive subject like in Greece where authorities arrested journalists to prevent contact with migrants or in Spain where various forms of obstruction were used by authorities in the Canary Islands.

Hungary’s unabashed political decision to throttle press freedom is a source of inspiration to certain other EU members and state-owned media in neighbouring countries are the leading victims of such aggressive policies, like TVP in Poland turned into a government propaganda outlet, while others such as the news agency STA in Slovenia say they have been deprived of state funding if they refuse to toe the government line.

A lack of justice for crimes of violence against journalists can have a chilling effect on journalists. Impunity has been especially flagrant in Slovakia where the businessman accused of ordering the murder of the investigative reporter Ján Kuciak was acquitted while in Malta, just one alleged hitman was convicted in 2020 for journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia’s murder. The inability or reluctance of states such as Bulgaria to protect threatened journalists contributes to the perception of danger.

Investigative journalists are not the only targets of violence; reporters covering demonstrations are also targeted. Many of them have been physically attacked by members or supporters of extremist groups during protests against coronavirus restrictions, or have been the victims of police violence and arbitrary arrest during demonstrations such as in France.

2. REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS, https://rsf.org/en
Media freedom cannot be taken for granted but must be actively preserved

Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO)
President, Funky Citizens

Few places in the world enjoy Europe's solid tradition of upholding the values of free and independent media. However, the advent of digital platforms, illiberal tendencies to shut down access to information, the growing threat to investigative journalists and the crisis generated by COVID-19 are placing different but simultaneous pressures on the ecosystem that allows that very free media to exist and fulfil its democratic role.

The EESC recently adopted an opinion1 on the Commission Communication on Europe’s media in the Digital Decade: an action plan to support recovery and transformation2. We particularly welcomed the acknowledgement that these underlying trends and the COVID-19 crisis could, without a strong policy and financial support response, undermine the resilience of Europe’s media sector and its democratic role.

The instruments proposed in the Communication encompass a wide range of actions focused on the recovery and transformation of the media industry and on increasing its resilience. For this to happen, steps must be taken to tackle the structural challenges facing the industry, and to foster an enabling environment in which the media and civil society are able to participate in an open debate, free from malign interference and disinformation.

However, there are some important points to consider if we want the EU to remain the best possible place for media freedom.

First, actions should be linked to the social realities underlying the discrepancies in the media and audiovisual industry landscape in the different Member States, and to the differing size and needs of local and national media. Financial support must therefore be transparent, accessible and inclusive, especially when it comes to local media and media start-ups.

Secondly, civil society must become a partner to empower citizens, strengthen media freedom and counter disinformation through media literacy.

If Europe’s Media Action Plan is to succeed, all stakeholders need to engage in the effort to recognise the media’s importance for our democratic values.

Press freedom in Europe: pluralism is crucial

Christian MOOS (DE)
Divisional Director, European and International Affairs, German Civil Servants Association (dbb)
Secretary-General, Europa-Union Germany
Board Member, European Movement Germany (EBD)

Press freedom and pluralism can no longer be taken for granted in the European Union. The World Press Freedom Index3 of Reporters Without Borders shows a steadily worsening situation. Some EU countries have less than brilliant rankings, despite the fact that fundamental rights and freedoms are in theory guaranteed by the EU and through EU membership. While the situation in the EU overall is deteriorating, the trend in certain Member States is acute.

The EESC is keeping a very close eye on this issue. The Committee’s Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)4 is conducting ongoing work on the topic and I am rapporteur for a relevant opinion5 in preparation.

Less press freedom is often an indirect consequence of market concentration.

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5. EESC opinion SOC/635 on Securing media freedom and diversity in Europe, https://europa.eu/!QM38xp
a development that has been evident across the EU for years and which must therefore be considered very carefully in policy-framing. Press pluralism goes hand in hand with press freedom.

While market concentration initially translated into falling advertising revenues and decreasing numbers of traditional daily newspapers, it has now been politically weaponised as a way of silencing critical media. Private individuals with connections to government buy up these media and dismiss bothersome journalists or get them to toe the line.

So while the number of professional journalists is already declining as a result of market processes due to digitisation, those that remain are often intimidated.

This is not just happening in EU countries that are subject to rule of law proceedings or countries for which the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism has been invoked for rampant corruption and violation of the rule of law.

In Germany, for instance, representatives of right-wing populist parties publicly threatened to storm publishing houses and throw their employees out on the streets in 2018. In Austria, the then leader of the right-wing populists wanted to let Russian oligarchs buy up a key daily newspaper in order to get it politically onside.

Europe’s future will also be shaped by the freedom and diversity of its media.

The EESC’s Group on FRRL is helping European civil society to collectively challenge the antipluralist and illiberal forces of our time.

Land of the Free Press

Tiina VYRYLÄINEN (FI)
Head of Policy Team, The Consumers’ Union of Finland

When presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin met in Finland in 2018, they were greeted by billboards welcoming them “to the land of free press”. For years and years Finland has topped press freedom lists. This year Finland was ranked second in the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

Finnish legislation does not place many restrictions on the press. Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and the Finnish Constitution. Individual pieces of legislation also support the right to freedom of speech, including the principle of public access to official records. Additionally, Finnish Criminal Law criminalises harassment, threats, defamation, violations of privacy, and hate speech, among other things.

In addition to the legislation, there is effective self-regulation in Finland. The Finnish Council for Mass Media (CMM) is a self-regulating committee established by publishers and journalists in the field of mass communication. It regulates almost all the Finnish media. Even though the CMM’s ethical guidelines and decisions are not legally binding, studies have shown that Finnish journalists are extremely committed to them. The CMM is considered exemplary and its importance for extensive but responsible press freedom cannot be underestimated.

However, effective self-regulation and a high ranking in the Press Freedom Index do not mean that press freedom does not face any obstacles. Misinformation, hate speech and harassment are growing threats in Finland, as they are all over the world. They weaken the public’s trust in traditional journalism and lead to self-censorship.

Freedom of speech and the press is a universal right and a prerequisite for a democratic society. We must actively strive to protect freedom of the press and react with determination when it is being threatened. If there is no free press, there is no democracy.

1. REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS, 2021
According to the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, press freedom is deteriorating in some EU Member States. Can you briefly describe your experience with the development of freedom of the press in Eastern Europe in recent years? What are the reasons behind and the consequences of these developments?

One of the first bills that raised eyebrows in Brussels after the Fidesz party came to power in Hungary in 2010 was the controversial media law. This marked the beginning of a long road towards consolidating control first over the public broadcaster and later over independent media outlets. The European digital agenda Commissioner at the time, Neelie Kroes, said she was “very pleased” with the compromises the Hungarian authorities made following an international outcry. Yet a decade later, Hungarian free media is on the brink of extinction, and others in Europe, in particular in Poland and Slovenia, have taken note of this model’s “success”.

After the fall of communism, it seemed that Hungary was on course to develop a Western-style diverse media market. Media giants from Germany, Switzerland and Finland entered the country. By now, all international media groups have exited, with the exception of RTL and Ringier Axel Springer. The latter provides little coverage of current public affairs and focuses more on tabloids, lifestyle and entertainment.

The only significant resistance was from journalists themselves, with mass resignations making headlines every couple of years, most recently from Index.

The consequences, of course, have been grave. The shrinking space for independent voices has been reflected in the coverage of minority issues. Leaked documents suggest, for example, that there was editorial guidance not to show children in footage of refugees and migrants in state media during the 2015 migration crisis.

It often goes unnoticed that private companies are affected as well. For instance, Coca Cola was fined in 2019 for running a banner ad campaign showing gay couples kissing.

However, those who ultimately pay the price are, unsurprisingly, the readers. To cite a recent example, the government refuses to let journalists access COVID-19 wards in hospitals and vaccination points, and bars healthcare workers from freely expressing their views to independent media outlets.

The result is a lack of information that leads many to downplay the dangers of the epidemic and fail to comply with measures.

What is your estimate for the coming period? Is there a chance that the situation will improve, or do you expect a further deterioration and why?

If journalism teaches you anything, it is that those who claim to have a crystal ball tend to overestimate their clairvoyance.

Current trends are worrying and, even though European policymakers acknowledge the precarious situation of the free press, history shows that change is unlikely to come from Brussels.

It is much more likely to come through the ballot box.

What action do you expect from the EU towards countries with a lack of freedom of the press? And do you also see a role for the EESC in this?

Critics say the strongest tool in the EU to intervene in the Hungarian media market is competition law because the

market is dominated by the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), an Orbán-ally conglomerate comprising nearly 500 media groups.

Nevertheless, the European executive has made it clear that it does not consider this to be the case and does not deem the current legislative framework sufficient to enable it to act.

One way forward is to secure more direct financing for independent reporting, investigative projects and exchange programmes enabling young journalists to gain experience in outlets abroad.

As an advisory body to the European Commission and the co-legislators, the EESC can play a role in amplifying those voices.

However, whether such calls are taken seriously and the value of press freedom enshrined in the Treaties is protected ultimately lies in the hands of those who are supposed to guard them.

Journalism in Malta 2021

Benjamin RIZZO (MT)
Financial and management consultant
President, Civil Society Committee within the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD)
Vice-President, Malta Federation of Professional Associations
Vice-President, European Council of Liberal Professions

Journalism and the media are known as the fourth pillar of any democracy: independent, fact-based and reliable journalism is something that any country depends on.

3rd May 2021 was the 30th anniversary of UNESCO’s World Press Freedom Day and it acts as a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom. It is also a day for media professionals to reflect on issues of press freedom and professional ethics. This year’s theme “Information as a Public Good” served as a call to affirm the importance of cherishing information as a public good and explored what can be done during the production, distribution and reception of content to strengthen journalism.

In Malta, this day was followed by a statement from the Institute of Maltese Journalists (IGM) warning the authorities and social media users against attempting to use the pandemic to restrict press freedom or silence debate. This warning was issued because advertising in the local media had reached very low levels due to restrictions linked to the pandemic. Adverts were mostly published by the government and authorities controlled by government.

PEN Malta (a social NGO for journalists) meanwhile called on the Maltese Government to stop suppressing information and to eradicate all obstacles for independent news organisations, many of which are financially crippled because of the pandemic. It was becoming apparent that certain ministers were only giving their attention to sympathetic media outlets.

Reporters without Borders compile a yearly World Press Freedom Index. For 2021 Malta is in 81st place worldwide, followed by European countries Bulgaria in 112th place and preceded by Poland (64th) and Greece (70th). This is bad news for Malta, and I look at Norway, which is first on the list.

The killing of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, three years ago, shook the Maltese population and the local media world. It cast a dark shadow over journalism and Malta. Persons associated with this murder have been charged in court. The story of this murder and details of what happened behind the scenes are still being unveiled, leading to other stories. We all wish and hope that this will never happen again and that all journalists will be safe to do their job unhindered. The government should try to appease the requests coming from IGM and all media outlets, in order to strengthen this very important pillar of democracy.

1. Institute of Maltese Journalists, https://igm.mt/
2. PEN Malta, https://penmalta.org/
Press freedom in Europe: a challenge for all the Member States

Julian PLOTTKA  
Senior Researcher, Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP), Berlin  
Research Associate, Passau University

Even if Europe is still the continent with the freest and most diverse media based on international comparisons, developments within the EU are now deeply concerning. The World Press Freedom Index 2021 considers the situation in five EU Member States to be “problematic”, and in only seven countries is press freedom rated as “very good”. In other words, 20 EU Member States are called upon to take specific steps to strengthen media freedom and diversity. These now include established democracies such as Germany and France. Where governments lack the political will to take such steps, EU bodies are urged to guarantee the upholding of European values.

The risks and challenges are manifold: journalists are subject to verbal and physical threats, or are being injured and murdered. Governments are making it easier to bring cases against journalists, undermining the independence of oversight bodies, controlling state advertising, and using tax law or personal contacts to influence the media. Using such methods, governments in the EU – and not just the committed autocrats – are gradually eroding democracy.

The digital revolution is also causing a slump in revenues, forcing traditional mass media to make cost savings, and worsening the employment situation of journalists. But high-quality journalism is not possible without financial underpinning. Concentration processes to reduce costs threaten the diversity of the media offer, the greatest challenge being posed by US internet companies.

Adequate attention is being paid at EU level to the threat to media freedom and diversity. The Commission has launched a series of initiatives, the European Parliament regularly highlights the issue, and the Commission’s Rule of Law Report addresses it. The real challenge is now to achieve concrete reform in the Member States. Hence the importance of the EESC’s planned own-initiative opinion (SOC/635) on Securing media freedom and diversity in Europe.

But for the situation to finally improve it is not enough for pressure to be exerted at EU level alone. Civil society is therefore urged in all Member States – including the seven countries that are not directly affected at present – to put the issue on the political agenda. The EESC should use the Conference on the Future of Europe as an opportunity to increase awareness.

The aim must be to encourage reforms in the 15 Member States in which the situation is only “fairly good” New EU programmes and civil society action plans also provide opportunities to strengthen the existing commitment to enhance media freedom and diversity. In addition, the EESC and civil society must join the European Parliament in pushing for the now available EU rule of law mechanism, which would enable the EU to withhold EU funding from Member States in breach of the rule of law, to be deployed as soon as possible so as to also guarantee press freedom in the five countries where the situation is problematic.

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Empower citizens to impact on the future of Europe, a comment by Kinga Joó with regard to the 2021 ECI Day

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

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) is a tool for participatory democracy at European level that empowers citizens to impact on the future of Europe. It was introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and has been in force since 2012.

Because the rules proved challenging for ECI initiators, they were revamped last year and as a result the ECI, which seemed to be losing steam, is now finding a new lease of life, with as many as 13 ECIs currently gathering support.

The examination procedure for successful initiatives under the new Regulation opened the door for more opportunities for dialogue, notably with debates on successful initiatives in plenary sessions in the European Parliament and, the Committee of Regions, as well as in the EESC, which had already started this practice under the previous regulation.

While few ECIs have made it to the end and even some successful ones have not translated into legislation, two of them, Right to Water and Stop Glyphosate, have had encouraging outcomes, which we discussed at the ECI Day this year. The 10th edition of the ECI Day took place exceptionally online and over two days.

3 June was a full day of debates on the ECI instrument, focusing on aspects that are key to making ECIs more powerful and strengthening participatory democracy at EU level. On 4 June, the organisers of ongoing initiatives were given the floor to present their initiatives.

With the yearly organisation of the ECI Day, the EESC has gained an important role in making the voice of the citizens heard and impacting the future of Europe.

2. On 12 January 2021, the revised Drinking Water Directive entered into force: Member States are required to improve access to water for all, especially for vulnerable and marginalised groups – follow-up to the ECI “Water and sanitation are a human right!”
3. On 27 March 2021, Regulation (EU) 2019/1381 on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain (Transparency Regulation) became applicable – follow-up to the ECI “Ban glyphosate and protect people and the environment from toxic pesticides”.
MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Kerli Ats speaks in debate on animal caging

Kerli ATS (ET)
Director, Central Union of Estonian Farmers

On 15 April, Diversity Europe Group Member Kerli Ats participated in a public hearing jointly organised by the European Parliament’s Committees on Agriculture and Rural Development and on Petitions regarding the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) “End the Cage Age”. The debate was opened by the committees’ chairs, Norbert Lins and Dolors Montserrat, along with Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová.

Ms Ats pointed out that the EESC had been the first EU institution to invite the ECI’s organisers to a public debate in January 2020, but had not taken an official position regarding animal caging yet. “However, the EESC has been calling for a comprehensive European food policy for years to enable the transition to more sustainable food systems and ensure the effective implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals,” said Ms Ats. “Animal health and welfare are key points in this vision for the future.”

During her speech, Ms Ats stressed that EU farming communities urgently needed to be supported in the transition to a more sustainable livestock sector that continues to meet consumers’ expectations while maintaining high standards of food safety, and animal health and welfare. “We need to be given a reasonable amount of time and support to restructure,” said Ms Ats.

According to Ms Ats, this hearing will show that it is really in the interest of society in general to have fair food prices and competition for EU farmers with respect to external competitors. “EU legislation has the highest standards of animal wellbeing in the world” she said. Closing her speech, Ms Ats welcomed the fact that the EU institutional partners had to address the issue raised by this successful ECI.


Using citizens’ science for the climate

Kęstutis KUPŠYS, LT
Representative, Alliance of Lithuanian Consumer Organisations

On 21 April 2021, our Member Kęstutis Kupšys spoke at the webinar “Clean cities, healthy citizens: cutting vehicle emissions”, organised by POLIS, the network of European cities and regions for transport innovation.

Referring to his work, as co-rapporteur, on the ongoing EESC opinion a New EU strategy on adaptation to climate change (NAT/815), he described the importance of citizens’ science at local level, in response to deteriorating air quality and rising greenhouse gas emissions.

The citizens’ science phenomenon gained prominence recently as part of the clean air campaign. The availability of low-cost measurement techniques enabled citizens to test air, soil or water quality in their neighbour-

2. ECI, End the Cage Age, https://europa.eu/2019/04/16/11-0390
5. POLIS, network for cities and regions for transport innovation, https://www.polisnetwork.eu/
6. EESC, opinion NAT/815, https://europa.eu/18444m
Mr Kupšys emphasised the importance of citizens’ findings: firstly, they provide evidence to underpin the defence of their environmental rights in collective grassroots campaigns, and secondly, they offer a widespread pool of affordable “on the ground” data collection techniques to support the monitoring of climate change effects and adaptation.

Mr Kupšys provided an example from the campaign he led in 2020 – nitrogen dioxide monitoring in Vilnius, Lithuania (see the results map here: https://bit.ly/Vilnius_NO2). The campaign was extended to two more Lithuanian cities and it included, together with regional partners, locations in Poland and Slovakia. Almost 500 NO2 measurement tubes were installed. “Levels of nitrogen oxides were either above allowed limits or just below them. The most worrying thing to me was to learn that in several instances, the highest pollutant concentrations were observed next to schools or leisure spots”, Mr Kupšys said. In his view, awareness raising and support for citizens’ initiatives are crucial to securing the broader public’s acceptance of climate change adaptation and mitigation policies.

The 2021 Civil Society Prize: Climate Action

The twelfth edition of the EESC Civil Society Prize has been launched.

The specific theme of the 2021 edition is Climate Action. The prize, which has a total value of EUR 50 000 and can be shared among up to five winners, will reward effective, innovative and creative initiatives carried out by civil society organisations and/or individuals on the territory of the EU which aim to promote a just transition towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.

The deadline for entries is 30 June 2021. Detailed information about the prize, as well as the contest rules and the on-line application form, are available on the EESC website at following address: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/civilsocietyprize/

We warmly invite you to spread the word about the prize and look forward to receiving your application if you are eligible.

For more information on the 2021 EESC Civil Society Prize visit the website of the Committee at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/eesc-civil-society-prize-2021
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

Conference on the Future of Europe: a unique opportunity to reconnect and engage with citizens

On 27 April, the EESC's plenary held a debate on the Committee's resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe – A new narrative for Europe. The debate was opened by EESC president Christa Schweng, who highlighted the vital importance that the Conference make concrete and measurable progress and not just consist of non-binding discussions with citizens that lead nowhere. Ms Schweng said the Conference's timeframe imposes limitations on all participants, but it should be seen as the starting point of a continuous process for greater engagement with Europe's citizens.

Presenting the resolution, rapporteurs Stefano Mallia, Employers' Group president, Oliver Röpke, Workers' Group president, and Séamus Boland, Diversity Europe Group president, agreed that the Conference gives Europe a unique opportunity to reconnect and engage with European citizens, and to let citizens have a meaningful say on their common future.

Mr Boland said that one outcome of the Conference should be the recognition by European and national authorities that “civil society are guardians of the common good, integral to identifying solutions and to building trust, shaping public opinion and acting as positive agents of change”.

In the following general discussion, EESC Members reiterated that civil society ideas and recommendations needed to have a real impact on future EU actions. Several Members of the Diversity Europe Group took the floor.

According to Lidija Pavić-Rogošić, the resolution was an important expression of the Committee's commitment to actively participate in and contribute to the Conference process.

Tymoteusz Zych called for an inclusive Conference framework, saying that “Europe is diverse in terms of social, legal, economic and political perspectives. Therefore, the framework should be as inclusive as possible”.

Following the debate, the EESC plenary adopted the resolution. The complete debate is available at: https://fb.watch/5BToAXNN1b/ and https://fb.watch/5B7qlnOFrb/.

New EU transport strategy must ensure progress on connectivity, working conditions and alternative fuels

On 28 April, EESC Members had the opportunity to discuss the European Commission's new Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility with Adina Vălean, European Commissioner for Transport.

The debate followed the adoption of the EESC opinion TEN/729 on this strategy, which, inter alia, welcomes the fact that the new transport strategy puts the focus on Sustainable and Smart Mobility.

In her speech, Commissioner re-affirmed that the strategy is “firmly anchored in the European Green Deal” and “sets out a roadmap to put transport on the right track for the future”. Ms Vălean’s speech was followed by a general debate with EESC Members, in which Diversity Europe Group Members Baiba Miltoviča, John Comer and Jarmila Dubravská took the floor.

Baiba Miltoviča, president of the TEN Section, emphasised that the transport sector was one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. In this context, she said: “We need to ensure that the strategy promotes better social conditions for workers, in particular in the aviation sector, as well as adequate EU financing, ensuring that no consumer groups suffer from the transformation of the transport sector, whether they live in a rural area or belong to a vulnerable group”.

1. EESC, A New Narrative for Europe - The EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe, https://europa.eu/!kU77My
4. EESC, Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility, https://europa.eu/!wM63tC
6. EESC, TEN Section, https://europa.eu/!kn94kX
John Comer highlighted the situation of rural areas in Europe, where isolation, partly caused by insufficient services, is a major cause of concern. There is the fear, he said, “that the sustainable mobility targets may only be achieved with significant compromises to lifestyle”. The European Commission had the responsibility to allay the fears of citizens and to present them with affordable alternatives for the transition towards sustainable mobility.

Jarmila Dubravská stressed the importance of transport for the production and distribution of agricultural products. She wondered how the EU could achieve competitiveness in this sector. Ms Dubravská also asked about the Commission’s approach to alternative fuels, to which Ms Vălean replied by highlighting the establishment of alliances for batteries, hydrogen and possibly for alternative sustainable fuels, which would allow stakeholders to submit their contributions on these topics.

The complete debate is available at: https://fb.watch/5JNKskFIVu/

European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan took centre stage in a series of debates

In the run-up to the Porto Social Summit on 7-8 May, the aim of which was to strengthen the commitment of Member States, European institutions, social partners and civil society to the implementation of the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), the EESC and the Diversity Europe Group held a series of debates to prepare their contributions.

The Group’s preparatory meeting for the April plenary session included a presentation by Santina Bertulessi, Deputy Head of Unit and political advisor in the Cabinet of Commissioner Nicolas Schmit. The presentation on “Poverty reduction through the EPSR and the Social Economy Action Plan: opportunities and challenges?” was followed by a brief exchange between Ms Bertulessi and members of the Group.

Kinga Joó, vice-president of the Group, spoke about the need to tackle the roots of poverty with a multi-generational approach targeting all members of families. She said that efforts to end child poverty in Europe needed to be stepped up beyond the Child Guarantee and ESF+.

Giuseppe Guerini, spokesperson for the EESC’s Social Economy Category, highlighted the role that social economy businesses could play in creating decent jobs as part of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that this role needed to be recognised and supported.

On the first day of the plenary session, 27 April, EESC members held a debate with the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, on the Action Plan for the EPSR, the upcoming EU Action Plan for Social Economy and the Porto Summit.

In this context, the Committee also presented and adopted a resolution on its contribution to the Porto Summit. In the resolution, the EESC states that all citizens must be able to participate in, identify with and find hope in the EPSR’s vision and future implementation, through the active engagement of civil society. In the Committee’s view, the Porto Summit was “an opportunity to demonstrate that the EU and Member States act together with its citizens and for their well-being, leaving nobody behind.”

Speaking to the plenary, Commissioner Schmit said: “One priority of the Porto Summit and the Action Plan is to revive social dialogue and empower social partners”. He saw many reasons to call for a more social Europe, ranging from the changes in the world of work to the devastating blows of the COVID-19 pandemic. The commissioner explained that the Action Plan was intended to improve the living and working conditions of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society.

Several Diversity Europe members engaged in the debate with the commissioner following his address. The Diversity Europe Group president, Séamus Boland, who was also one
of the rapporteurs for the EESC resolution, said: “The Social Pillar must take more account of the medium to longer term impact of the pandemic on European health systems. COVID-19 has clearly illustrated that health can have a direct impact on economic and social stability. In implementing the Pillar, **increased and sustainable investments must be made** by Member States to upgrade public health services and infrastructure, and to improve coordination on public health within and among Member States.”

Alain Coheur, president of the Committee’s INT Section¹, said: “We are more than ever at a crossroads. We must act as architects of the world of today and of future generations, to not miss the window of opportunity that has opened. In the light of the disaster we are experiencing, the logic of social spending and the imposition of austerity must be replaced by a **positive logic of social investments**.”

Pietro Vittorio Barbieri, vice-president of the Group, explained that social inclusion was built through specific measures for groups experiencing discrimination or social exclusion, as well as through mainstreaming policies. In this context, he highlighted a problem: “Some national recovery and resilience plans are based on specific measures that run the risk of becoming a new path of exclusion. We are counting on the Commission to **make the European strategies for equality a guideline for national plans**.”

The EESC’s TEN Section² president Baiba Miltoviča welcomed the fact that principle 20 of the EPSR reaffirmed the right to access essential services like housing. “We need to **operationalise the Renovation Wave for Europe** to ensure appropriate funding and implementation measures and reinforce local actions to tackle energy poverty”, she said.

The last member to speak from the Diversity Europe Group was Ágnes Cser. She highlighted the **importance of communication** in bringing Europe closer to its citizens. “We have to speak to citizens in their mother tongues and need to find the means of communication that reaches everybody”, she said.

Ms Cser also asked for information on the budget to be allocated to a European Health Union³, a proposal by the Commission.

On 28 April, the EESC also hosted a **high-level online conference** entitiled “Porto Social Summit – New impetus to Europe's social commitment”, to discuss the importance of social Europe, the key elements of the EPSR, and its implementation at EU and national level. Diversity Europe President Séamus Boland and other members of the group contributed to it.

**Mr Boland** said: “There is a necessity for the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan to become an effective tool to allow all actors to work in partnership and **build more equal, inclusive and resilient European communities and societies.** This implies engaging with all sections of society, including the most marginalised.”

Finally, at the **High-Level Conference of the Porto Social Summit** on 7 May, EESC representatives expressed the Committee’s dedication to fostering economic and social reconstruction by putting people at the heart of policies. More information can be found on the EESC website at: [https://europa.eu/cr88fx](https://europa.eu/cr88fx)

The complete plenary debate with Commissioner Nicolas Schmit is available at: [https://fb.watch/5JNLAw2i8X/](https://fb.watch/5JNLAw2i8X/)

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1. Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT)
2. Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN)

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**30/06/2021**

Webinar “Age of inequality: Youth in times of COVID-19”
OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK
BY OUR MEMBERS

The last EESC plenary session took place from 27 and 28 April, in a fully remote format. The EESC plenary adopted 29 opinions and 2 information reports, 15 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES), rapporteur, INT/9221 A new consumer agenda
Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO), rapporteur, SOC/6662 A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025
Elena-Alexandra CALISTRU (RO), rapporteur for TEN/7311 Media and Audiovisual Action Plan and SOC/6744 European Judicial Training Strategy 2021-2024
Giuseppe GUERINI (IT), rapporteur for INT/9254 The role of social economy in the creation of jobs and in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and INT/9216 Regulation on European data governance
Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL), rapporteur, SOC/6657 Building a European Health Union
Ionuţ SIBIAN (RO), rapporteur, SOC/6678 Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025
João Diogo DE CASTRO NABAIS DOS SANTOS (PT), rapporteur, INT/9329 Digitalisation of justice
John COMER (IE), co-rapporteur, NAT/8079 Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability Towards a Toxic-Free Environment
José Manuel ROCHE RAMO (ES), rapporteur, NAT/805 Evaluation on Directive on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides (Information report)
Martin Josef SCHAFFENRATH (AT), rapporteur, INT/9261 Pharmaceutical strategy
Maurizio MENSI (IT), rapporteur, TEN/7301 Cybersecurity and Resilience of Critical Entities
Rudolf KOLBE (AT), rapporteur for INT/90410 Liberal Professions 4.0 and INT/92715 Action plan/intellectual property

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website.

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 7 and 8 July. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

A list including all new work appointments of Diversity Europe Group Members is available on the Committee’s website.

1. EESC, opinion INT/922, https://europa.eu/!JC76Pc
2. EESC, opinion SOC/666, https://europa.eu/!kH43QX
4. EESC, opinion SOC/674, https://europa.eu/!fP66mn
5. EESC, opinion INT/925, https://europa.eu/!Xm44fP
6. EESC, opinion INT/921, https://europa.eu/!Km444P
7. EESC, opinion NAT/807, https://europa.eu/!wP49hV
8. EESC, opinion SOC/665, https://europa.eu/!wP49hV
9. EESC, opinion INT/932, https://europa.eu/!qW38kG
10. EESC, opinion NAT/805, https://europa.eu/!wP49hV
11. EESC, information report NAT/805, https://europa.eu/!fM64NR
12. EESC, opinion INT/926, https://europa.eu/!fP84mM
13. EESC, opinion TEN/730, https://europa.eu/!wP49hV
15. EESC, opinion INT/921, https://europa.eu/!pB4Y1h
16. EESC, https://europa.eu/!Wf86wY
17. EESC, plenary sessions, https://europa.eu/!Dg84qG
18. EESC, Diversity Europe Group, News, New work appointments – April 2021, https://europa.eu/!fM64NR