



The Association of Former Members after the Epidemic

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**Biannual review may contain
certain anachronisms.**



Editorial by the AFM President

The pandemic and its human, political, economic and social effects has affected us all to varying extents.

In this regard, we must applaud the Commission's commitment to working tirelessly, despite the uncertainties, to provide common and coherent measures to address this unprecedented situation, the full repercussions of which remain unknown.

This pandemic has also highlighted the inherent shortcomings in the bodies and functioning of the EU, where (except in a few Member States), the decisions and initiatives taken have one thing in common – a tendency towards nationalism. This is both a sign of the lack of trust in the policies put forward and a safety reflex that runs counter to solidarity, which should prevail.

The difficulties arising from the predominance of the states in the decision-making process have been brought to light. Member States are unable to pursue a coherent common policy, and are more concerned about reducing the Commission's prerogatives – as the regrettable episode in Ankara illustrates.

This is one of the many consequences of rejecting the draft constitution, and of the Council's imposed dominance. The latter is the result of institutional trends that hinder the implementation of more committed and more integrated activities and initiatives.

For the record, the Council was set up as a consultative body, upon a proposal from France, and subsequently upgraded to an institution. It now plays a dominant role, replacing the Commission's prerogatives.

This reversal of roles has led to some relaxations in the common rules to be followed and in the honouring of the commitments that underpin EU membership.

Today, some Member States pursue policies that are dangerous for the future of the EU, split hairs over every topic, haggle over every decision, and implement policies that are contrary to their commitments.

This lethal interinstitutional rivalry was shamefully exposed in Ankara: Mr Erdoğan laid a very unsubtle trap and we jumped straight into it with both feet! That was a major political error. Moreover, what about the attitude of the President of the Council? I am still speechless.

Since then, both sides have sought to minimise the incident. Yet, in my humble opinion, that would be a serious mistake, leading us to become ambivalent and exposing us to new pitfalls.

We need to learn the lessons of this institutional tsunami, to determine the causes and responsibilities, and ultimately, to establish who is in charge of leading EU policy.

The crisis also has an upside: it shines a light on the need to bring our Union back to life and it shows the urgent need for an extensive overhaul of the institutional set-up. By drawing lessons from this period, the Union can ensure that it has the resources needed to take decisions and act effectively and quickly.

The organisation of the Porto Social Summit and the launch of a major debate with citizens on the future of Europe in Strasbourg would seem to indicate that there is an awareness of the overarching need to deepen, strengthen and relaunch the European project.

As an unapologetic optimist, I remain with you, committed to building a Europe that meets the needs of the situation and its citizens' expectations.

In our field, as organised civil society, we have a duty to make citizens heard and to share their point of view.

Like you, I have full confidence in the EESC's ability, and in particular, in its president, Christa Schweng, to give new impetus to the voice of organised civil society.

As for us, the members of the AFM, we are ready, within our power and our means, to support all initiatives promoting a more committed and integrated policy.

Roger Briesch, *AFM president*

Time to push for a real restart

by **Christa Schweng**

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

A very important and long-awaited project is finally kicking off: the Conference on the Future of Europe, as it is referred to, starts on Europe Day, 9 May. This is a unique chance not only to engage in a broad debate on how the EU should evolve but also to bring ownership of the European project back to its citizens – at national, regional and local level. We cannot miss this opportunity.

While the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the everyday lives of all Europeans for more than a year, attitudes towards the EU remain positive, according to the latest Eurobarometer conducted in February and March 2021. Even though the image of the EU and trust in the Union have increased, reaching their highest levels in more than a decade, it is still less than half of Europeans that trust the European Union (49%).

It is time for a real bottom-up engagement. We must connect with all Europeans and make them understand how important the European project is and how it touches our daily lives. We must engage equally with those already convinced and with those who are hesitant about the union. Our main goal is for the Conference on the Future of Europe to be inclusive, outcome-oriented and to reach out beyond the already converted.

To engage citizens, we first need to start listening to what they have to say. We need to take seriously their concerns and their proposals to improve the functioning of the EU and its policies. We need to reach out to the ordinary person in the street in each and every corner of the EU. And to do that we also need to adapt our language and make it understandable for all, not only for the European bubble.



A New Narrative

The future of Europe also requires a new, positive narrative. We need to prove that Europe is a great place to be and to prosper – a place that creates opportunities for everyone to live the life they want, based on commonly agreed values. People in the US are proud of their American dream; I believe that it is time for Europeans to finally start enjoying and appreciating their own way of life and the benefits it brings.

At its most recent plenary session in April, the EESC adopted a resolution on this new narrative for Europe together with our roadmap of activities we want to hold as part of our input into the Conference.

We believe that the success of the Conference will depend on the ability to sketch a new storyline for Europe, grounded in the realities of everyday life. Such a narrative must be more than a list of achievements: it should provide a vision for the future built on cooperation across borders, strengthening the links between the people of Europe. The objective is to rediscover and renew a much-needed sense of community based on shared values, generating new European momentum to face current and future challenges.

The future of Europe will be one of a prospering economy that adopts the most successful business models to swiftly recover from the COVID-19 crisis and lead the world in the green and digital transitions. To achieve this, and to deliver high-quality jobs and sustainable growth, we need: a strong and resilient European industrial base, a genuine digital single market, and the right framework conditions, including the necessary skills profiles. We need to defend an open market while championing its interests and values more effectively.

At the same time, all European values, including solidarity, social justice, gender equality and sustainable prosperity, should be safeguarded. We need to re-think our growth and governance models towards sustainability, build a more equal society and place civil society organisations at the centre of this reconstruction and recovery. It is imperative to leverage public support for these values in order to do so.

Green and digital transformation

According to another Eurobarometer survey, climate change and environmental issues are seen as the biggest challenge for the EU. For the European Economic and Social Committee, two major transitions – towards a green and a digital Europe – are of the utmost importance. The conference creates a unique opportunity to advance our greening and digitalisation efforts while ensuring that no one is left behind.

I have already highlighted the importance of this in my presidency priorities, saying that these transitions should be mainstreamed into every policy area. Sustainable development should become a mindset and the basis of a competitive European economy, making sure not to leave anybody behind. Efforts towards recovery should not lead us to simply restore what existed in the past – we need to improve policies and working methods, while reaping the benefits of the ongoing transitions.

The green transformation, together with digitalisation, will be the driving force of the recovery plan for Europe. The ecological transition will help modernise industry and create new high-quality jobs and more job opportunities. We must not forget that ambitious climate-protection measures often represent significant challenges for businesses. In the efforts to achieve a greener economy, business has to be considered as part of the solution and must be encouraged to play an active part in shaping the transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy.

In the current context of economic downturn, it is essential to provide the best possible support to achieve recovery. For that, I am also heavily counting on NextGenerationEU, the temporary instrument designed to boost the recovery, which is the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget. Its centrepiece, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, makes EUR 672.5 billion in loans and grants available to support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States. I also see the EESC having a role here in monitoring these money flows to check whether they really reach those in need.

«Never let a good crisis go to waste»

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its economic and societal consequences, has put many Europeans in an uncertain, difficult situation. On top of the many deaths caused by the virus, thousands of people have lost their jobs, thousands of companies have gone bankrupt. A difficult time like this is often a good moment to consider and implement fresh ideas, to work on a better future for all of us. This is the opportunity for an organised restart and recovery.

As stated in my presidency priorities, we should put a focus on achieving a Europe that **is economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable**. We should vow to work towards a positive future for all of us.

The EESC's role in the Conference on the Future of Europe

This brings us back to the conference and our role there. The EESC, as the representative of organised civil society at EU level, will do its best to ensure fair representation of the different societal groups at the conference. Fair representation means that all the groups and their opinions have to be considered, and not just the usual ones who shout the loudest.



We should approach the conference with an open mind, meaning with no foregone conclusions already on the table. Preconceived opinions offering familiar solutions for existing problems must be avoided. If we already know about them and they did not work, I see no point in re-using the same ideas over and over.

The EESC also supports the idea put forward by Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič of incorporating the results of the conference into the Commission's work programme for 2022 onwards. This is a crucial point, which would underpin the credibility and ambition of this whole process.

With regard to a clear structure of how to use the ideas and the results drawn from the conference, we are in favour of creating a «dashboard» where citizens can follow up on the measures coming out of the conference. Citizens need to be able to see in a transparent way the state of play and a clear timeline for the measures they worked on. The institutions need to clearly explain why they are or are not following up on certain measures. Credibility needs to be guaranteed for citizens' input and the basic ideas of the conference.

To ensure broad bottom-up reach out, we, as organised civil society, want to partner up with our network of national and regional Economic and Social Councils, civil society organisations such as European Movement International, and similar organisations.

In mid-June we want to kick off a large conference to discuss our new narrative for Europe and cross-check planned activities with relevant partners.

The core of these activities will focus on «Going local» missions to guarantee real dialogue. The going local mission will end with a Grand European Civil Society Conference where we present the results of the missions.

To conclude, the EESC believes in the need for a strong, shared narrative for the European Union.

In that sense, Europe has to be considered as:

1. a guardian of shared fundamental values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law,
2. a global promoter of sustainability, open and fair trade and multilateralism,
3. a haven for a unique economic and social model based on fair competition and solidarity in an area without internal borders, and
4. a driver of sustainable prosperity, with a strong European civil society at its heart.

I would like to encourage you to get in touch with your networks and convince as many people as possible to contribute to this important joint project. Let us join our ideas and forces to ensure a positive outcome for all of us.

Christa SCHWENG
President of the EESC

Christa Schweng, the president for the EESC



We devote hours and hours, entire years, to our profession. When we stop we turn the page overnight, from one day to the next, and we are no longer part of this world of work. However, one thing lasts forever: friendship. Friendship is the deep bonds that we have forged, which bind us even if we no longer work together, we do not see each other as often and we live in distant countries.

I want to talk to about one such friendship: my friendship with the current president of the European Economic and Social Committee, Christa Schweng.

Molière said, «friendship requires a little more mystery». Well, that was not the case for Christa and I. While she is Austrian and I am Greek, as two young women and employers' representatives with a particular interest in social affairs, we very quickly found ourselves working together as part of the EESC. Which explains how I started to appreciate her qualities as a colleague, as a woman and, above all, as a person.

Her sound knowledge, her exemplary work ethic and her hard work were clear for everyone to see.

I quickly recognised her courage, sincerity, honesty, open-mindedness and her ability to see the big picture, which enabled her to defend certain interests while also understanding the other party's point of view. Moreover, it has allowed her to work for compromise, consensus and the wellbeing of all.

These values fuel her strong European convictions and her commitment to democratic values and the contribution that civil society can make.

From these beliefs, she draws the enthusiasm, energy and hope that inspires her to continue working tirelessly for a better future, even in these challenging times. She does so with the support of her team, the vice-presidents, the presidents of the groups and sections, the members of the Committee and of course, the secretariat.

On a more personal note, I would like to take this opportunity to thank her publicly for all of the vulnerable moments, worries and laughter we have shared, as women, mothers, professionals and as human beings. I want to thank her for listening so well, for her well-known empathy, and for being there at all times: both in times of sadness and in times of joy.

You will therefore understand why I was filled with joy when she was elected as head of the Committee. I was overjoyed for her of course, but also happy to see her personal qualities and all of the work she has done over the years for the Committee and for Europe being recognised.

I will conclude by repeating the motto of her presidency, which is so relevant and crucial at this time: «united for the future of Europe!»

Irini PARI (AFM member)

We remember Ivan Voles

The Czech Republic, which has a population of ten million, has so far had 30 000 COVID19 related deaths. The Czech Republic is a country with a good health system, with skilled and self-sacrificing staff, so the sad statistics show how tragic the pandemic has been. The 30 000 lives of our fellow citizens are not just a number – each has left behind their own individual life story, grieving families, friends, colleagues and the rest of us. We also think of those who became infected in the course of their work and succumbed to Covid, a topical concern given the World Day for Safety and Health at Work that trade unions around the world are marking around this time.

On this occasion we would like to commemorate first and foremost the friends and colleagues who spent part of their lives with us at the European Economic and Social Committee and whom, as a result of the coronavirus epidemic, we shall not see again.

One of them was Ivan Voleš, who represented the Czech Republic in the Employers' Group at the EESC from 2004 to 2015. He succumbed to the disease on 25 January this year and his death has profoundly affected all the members of the delegation who met him and worked with him as members both of the EESC and of our Association of Former Members.

Ivan was and will remain a respected expert who worked with dignity and responsibility at the EESC in the spirit of its tenets and principles. Ivan's expertise, as well as his diplomatic skills, rightly made him a key member of our committee in Brussels, one of the «three musketeers of the Single Market», as colleagues called him.

At the same time, we enjoyed discussing things with him when we had some free time, because his wisdom, sense of humour and



sporting spirit enriched us and helped us find ways to achieve our shared European goals.

We are left with beautiful memories and thank all those who have expressed their condolences to his family and his friends.

Ivan's former colleagues: **Vladimíra, Marie, Josef, Dana, Helena, Lucie, Zdeněk, Pavel, Jaroslav, Roman, Ludvík, Evina**

Addressing the Challenges of the Digital Future



Current Situation and Justification

Digitalisation is developing rapidly and national and European legislation must keep pace. This calls for a sound and ambitious regulatory framework, including legally binding ethical rules and clear rules on liability. Such dynamic development also calls for flexible and adaptable processes that require constant dialogue between all the parties involved

Impact of COVID-19 crisis on digital transformation

With the recent – and ongoing – COVID-19 pandemic, society has been facing a reality check when it comes to the use of digital technology and this has posed many new challenges. The need to communicate, study and work remotely has shown that many people are not adequately prepared for the effective use of up-to-date digital technologies, nor is the digital infrastructure capable of ensuring equal access or inclusive participation via digital technologies. Digital networks have not been scaled up to cope with the increased load, and sufficient investments will have to be made to make high speed and efficient communication accessible not only for commercial purposes but also for private life, even in remote areas.

Furthermore, quarantine and temporary border closures between Member States have shown that there are some other implications and shortcomings relating to the current state of affairs in the digital single market when it comes to frontier workers and teleworking. The COVID-19 crisis has also led to a huge increase in e-commerce and cashless payments, along with a rise in unfair and fraudulent practices. The need to change habits because of the measures national governments have taken to counter the spread of COVID-19 might have long lasting effects on consumer practices and work relations in the long term. The positive and negative effects of this change need to be taken into account when developing new policies in that connection.

Recommendations

The importance needs to be stressed of digital solutions for the implementation of the Green Deal, especially in relation to the circular economy, energy consumption, raw materials for ICT and recyclability of ICT equipment. These, however, are not the only challenges that need to be tackled. Europe must therefore take the lead in the just transition to a healthy planet, and a new digital world requires that the challenges of green and digital transformation go hand-in-hand, so that digital technologies support the Green Deal with respect of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs):

- To ensure a level playing field, rules applying offline – from competition and single market rules and consumer protection to intellectual property, taxation and workers' rights – should also apply online.
- Europe's digital future, based on a human-centred approach, will only be successful if people can have trust – trust in a digital life. Appropriate safeguards on privacy, safety and data governance and Transparency of AI algorithms are crucial to help gain that trust.

Further recommendations

- Invest in the right future technologies,
- Promote the training of people
- Create trust among citizens, encouraging them to take an active part in the transformation and to remain active consumers offline and online
- The digital transition needs to be just, sustainable and socially acceptable.

Additional efforts need to be made and the means for the digital training of members of socially vulnerable groups have to be provided, including individuals with low levels of literacy and the elderly who lack skills, experience or even hardware to use internet platforms and who have been left without convenient means for communication.

COVID-19 has made social contacts between family members and others more difficult and made social and other public services unavailable or at least less readily available to them. Quarantine and temporary border closures between Member States have also shown that there are some other implications and shortcomings relating to the current state of affairs in the digital single market when it comes to frontier workers and teleworking. The COVID-19 crisis has also led to a huge increase in e-commerce and cashless payments, along with a rise in unfair and fraudulent practices.

The need to change habits because of the measures national governments have taken to counter the spread of COVID-19 might have long lasting effects on consumer practices and work relations in the long term. The positive and negative effects of this change need to be taken into account when developing new policies in that connection.

Education in preparation for a digital life

Education and training that provide digital skills are the key to being prepared for a digital life. The Commission's focus is on digital competences and skills, but it needs to better distinguish between technical and social competences, although both are of vital importance.

- Creating «workability» – instead of only adjusting «employability» – requires measures for continuing support of life-long learning.
- Technical skills (programming at different levels) will be required for most professionals in the future. This is a challenge for education systems and vocational training organisations in the Member States.
- Professionals need to be trained in new tools and they need to be aware of the characteristics, limits and risks, because they are ultimately responsible.
- Nevertheless, at least basic technical skills will have to be acquired by as many consumers (citizens) as possible in order to understand, use and engage with digital technologies and tools in a productive, inclusive and safe way.
- Basic technical skills are necessary to support people of all ages, but especially older people, so that they can understand and safely use digital technologies and tools in their everyday life.
- Social skills do not require particular technical knowledge, but they should be taught at the earliest possible age. Social skills enable children, consumers and citizens to understand the background of digital systems and make the best use of them. They help to identify possible threats from manipulation or crime and to assess the flood of information received. General education is still the best preparation for future developments.
- Special skills, knowledge and awareness are required to use and work with artificial intelligence. In the rapidly changing times of the digital era, merely helping individuals to acquire a minimum set of skills is not enough and it is crucial to ensure that the Skills Guarantee becomes a guaranteed pathway that enables and encourages people to advance further and reach the highest achievable level of skills
- The role of the social partners in achieving a fair and just transition is crucial. It is essential that the strategy anticipate skills needs and thus also support timely and appropriate reskilling and upskilling. The role of the social partners and their involvement is of utmost importance in that regard, as it is also when discussions on the introduction of new technologies are taking place.



The Commission's Three Main Pillars

The various initiatives presented and announced for this year and next are divided into three main pillars:

Technology that works for people:

- White Paper on Artificial Intelligence (COM(2020) 65 final/ see INT/894);
- Strategy for quantum technologies, blockchain and supercomputing;
- Action Plan on 5G and 6G (presented as COM(2020) 50 final/see TEN/704);
- Digital Education Action Plan and a reinforced Skills Agenda;
- Initiatives to improve labour conditions of platform workers;
- Standards for secure and borderless public sector data flows and services.

A fair and competitive economy:

- European Data Strategy (presented as COM(2020) 66 final/ see TEN/708);
- Review of the fitness of EU competition rules;
- Industrial Strategy Package;
- Communication on Business Taxation for the 21st century;
- New Consumer Agenda.

An open, democratic and sustainable society:

- New and revised rules to deepen the Internal Market for Digital Services;
- Revision of the eIDAS Regulation;
- Media and Audiovisual Action Plan;
- European Democracy Action Plan;
- European Cybersecurity Strategy;
- Initiative to develop a high precision digital model of the earth;
- A circular electronics initiative;
- Promotion of electronic health records.

Grace ATTARD, ACR, Malta,
EESC/CCMI, AFM Vice-President

Some Thoughts



I have worked for my organisation, Faith in Older People (FiOP), for nearly 14 years, several of which overlapped with my time at the EESC. Through both of these roles, I have developed a strong awareness of the importance of being committed to meeting social needs, of caring for staff and of building

individual, organisational and international relationships. This piece is a short reflection on the very difficult year many people have experienced. In writing this, I am acutely aware that I have been fortunate in living in the countryside with its wide open spaces, in being able to be in a bubble with our daughter and our grandchildren and in keeping in touch with a wide group of people and having a job which is fulfilling. However, I still yearn to be part of the wider world, so I wonder what it must be like for those not in this position.

FiOP supports the spiritual wellbeing of older people and those who care for them. For us, the spiritual dimension is defined as «that which gives meaning and purpose to our lives»; this can be derived from music, nature, relationships and faith. Lockdown has shown us how all these things matter in our lives to varying degrees and how we have perhaps come to appreciate them more and realise the central role they play in our lives.

We all cope in different ways with stress, trauma, sadness, loss and bereavement. The pandemic has certainly highlighted this as people have come forward to volunteer to support their neighbours and local communities; health and social care staff have been amazing, and individuals have found the fortitude to cope with lockdown. Life has been extremely difficult for many people as they have cared for children, people with disabilities and those experiencing dementia with tight restrictions in

place. How people have coped has thrown into sharp relief the inequalities in our society, which were present before and have now been exacerbated. The «new normal» must address this reality in practical terms in relation to our healthcare, social care and education systems, and in terms of opportunities. Going back to the «old normal» must not be an option. A report was published recently entitled *If not now – when?* We have to work together to ensure that it is now.

One of the hardest issues for people is being deprived of essential relationships with friends, family and work colleagues, all of whom provide us with a sense of belonging and a place in the world. The enormous grief of those who have experienced the death of a family member or friend because of COVID-19 or other causes has been exacerbated by not being able to be with them in those final hours or share a goodbye at a funeral or receive comfort from others afterwards. This makes a loss even more raw.

In these circumstances, our health and social care staff have played a pivotal role in standing in for family while also experiencing losses – in some circumstances, many times over. This takes its toll, as must the anxiety felt by these workers about spreading the virus in both care settings and their own homes. The pandemic has highlighted the vital role played by our care home and care-at-home staff. The Scottish government has apologised for putting these workers in vulnerable positions and I can only hope that the reports emerging from the government about action for the future are not going to be empty rhetoric. Things have to change or we will see a huge exodus from both health and social care services.

FiOP's response to the pandemic has been to support those who care for us in our own homes, in residential care facilities and through our faith communities by establishing a free online confidential Listening and Caring Service (this link will take you away from our website) provided by experienced listeners so that carers have an opportunity to offload their experiences, feelings and anxieties in a safe place that is away from work and family. Our view is that such a service should exist to support staff in the long term as it takes time to overcome the initial crisis and to feel that it is okay to talk about yourself.





The pandemic has brought into focus the spiritual aspects of our lives in relation to our physical, emotional and psychological needs. All of these aspects make us who we are and we often talk about someone's spirit in relation to managing both the good things in our lives and the difficult aspects. It is what keeps us going. This spiritual focus is evident in the number of people turning to faith communities. Zoom-enabled services have led to a huge increase in the number of people attending church services. What does this tell us? IT has provided a way for people to easily access services to which there might previously have been a range of barriers – accessibility, transport, support, distance and so on. Face-to-face interaction is much needed but let us not lose sight of this benefit whilst also being aware that digital access is not easy for everyone.

FiOP wants to continue to strengthen recognition of the spiritual dimension of our wellbeing as we move forward. We want more people to acknowledge that spiritual care is an integral part of person-centred care and that, even if you do not have faith yourself, it is important to appreciate that it might be of great importance to the person for whom you care. Our mental wellbeing is bound up with our sense of identity and belonging and our interdependence, which reminds me of one of my favourite sayings: «I am because we are» (from Ubuntu philosophy: «The belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity»).

MAUREEN O'NEILL

*Director, Faith in Older People
A previous president of the SOC Section
April 2021*

Thanks to all caregivers



COVID has disrupted our lives. No more handshakes, no more kissing or hugging our loved ones, no more trips to the cinema or swimming pool, no more meals together as a family or out at restaurants ... For children it means online education and for many parents working at home ... For others, it means short-time work, even losing a job or the business going bust ... and that's not the end of it!

An end to travel, trips abroad, meeting other Europeans, which for us European integrationists is particularly difficult!

For some of us, however, COVID means even more than all that – as if that was not enough. For these people, it is the loss of a loved one or a serious illness, hospitalisation and intensive care.

That is what happened to my neighbour. I would like to tell you his story.

Guy was an 84-year-old pensioner, in excellent health, dynamic and positive, always ready to help his neighbours. He gardened and kept hens. He was also very active in the Christian community in my village, he led the singing at Mass and organised the prayers for the services.

Guy caught COVID at the end of October last year. He had a high fever and a continuous cough, and after a week his doctor decided he should go into hospital. After a few days in intensive care, with his condition deteriorating, the doctors decided to put him into an artificial coma and insert a breathing tube. He was unconscious for three weeks before being woken up and given a tracheotomy so that the oxygen he needed would go straight into his lungs. After all these weeks lying immobile on a drip with a feeding tube, he had lost the ability to do anything at all. Because of the tracheotomy he couldn't speak or swallow food, his muscles had atrophied and he couldn't move ... Gradually, however, his condition improved and in mid-January the nursing staff lifted him out of bed with a special machine and sat him in a chair for an hour. He talks about that now as the most difficult of all his ordeals: getting his muscles to move and hold him in a sitting position was exhausting and he couldn't wait to be lain back down again and drift back into semi-consciousness. However, Guy is a very proactive man whose greatest fear is being a burden on others. Happy and surprised to have been spared (the nursing staff were always telling him they had nearly lost him and gave him special attention because he was their «miracle recovery man», the one who proved that it was worth fighting), he put all his energy into regaining his autonomy so that he could go home.

It took him three months. At the beginning of February, the big tracheotomy tube was replaced by a thinner tube and Guy was able to start talking, whispering as his vocal chords had been damaged by the endotracheal tube. Still being fed through a nasogastric tube, he could not yet raise an arm to lift a spoon to his mouth. His first major victory came when, at last, he was able to stand up for a few minutes at the beginning of March. Then his progress took off – he learned to write again, to sit for half a day, to try and raise his arms, to lift his legs, until the day when, for the first time, he was able to walk to the toilet with his zimmer frame. The nursing staff then decided he could leave intensive care, where he had spent over four months. The cost of a day in intensive care is EUR 3 000. Three cheers for the French social security system, which allows everyone to receive treatment regardless of their income, without the patient having to pay anything!

After intensive care, Guy spent a few weeks in the respiratory ward, where the tracheotomy tube was removed and replaced with a small nasal tube feeding oxygen into his nostrils. After this severe form of COVID, Guy's lungs were permanently damaged and he would always need his oxygen cylinder ... He also had to have respiratory physiotherapy and speech therapy sessions, because, breathing with difficulty and having to save his breath, he needed to learn to talk without choking, to breathe while talking, which is not as easy as it sounds ...

Then in mid-March, Guy was transferred to a rehabilitation centre, where he had to work hard. Every morning, he had physiotherapy sessions to learn how to walk again, and every afternoon occupational therapy sessions «threading beads», he says, to retrieve the use of his fingers and write properly ... This hard work was to bear fruit, as in mid-April the nursing staff said he would soon be able to go home.

Guy has been home now for a few days, much thinner but smiling. When I asked him what he would take away from this ordeal, he replied: «I have matured through it». I was surprised by his answer, and said, «But you were already mature», to which he replied: «No, you see, I didn't know that so much compassion or care for others, so much empathy, generosity and kindness existed in this world. I had no idea that the humanity I encountered at the hospital even existed. Everyone should know this. What is more, I am writing to the hospital director to express my admiration and gratefulness and to thank all the nursing staff for what they have done for me.»

Nursing staff the world over, you who have been heroically striving for over a year now to save lives, thank you for embodying this image of humanity, which makes us even more determined to fight for a better world.

Béatrice OUIIN (AFM member)

COVID-19 in 2021 France: A virus breeding mess and confusion everywhere

A political and health mess in the land of Louis Pasteur

France's hospitals and clinics were not equipped to deal with the virus. Everything devolved into a fine mess, showing just how unprepared the healthcare system was to cope with a pandemic. This mess was seasoned with unfounded government statements seeking to justify the situation: no masks, not enough beds in ICU, then not enough tests, then not enough vaccines, then controversial vaccines and a population becoming rapidly vaccine-sceptic, including in hospitals where COVID-19 is now a nosocomial disease. Confusion reigns, basically.

There have been serious shortcomings in terms of supply, planning and logistical capacity. The situation has improved in leaps and bounds as regards vaccination, and the centres are working splendidly.

However nearly 18 months after the pandemic began, in Île-de-France, one of the regions hit hardest, over 90% of ICU beds were still occupied by COVID-19 patients on 15 March, and more than 40% of operations had been postponed. Variants are moving faster than vaccination. Rates are going down slowly: on 1 May, there were still nearly 300 people dying each day in France. Lives and families are shattered, exhausted hospitals are running at full capacity, the health system is struggling, education has been disrupted, people are out of work, and businesses are going to the wall one after the other.

A political and social mess COVID-19: a eurosceptic virus

The virus has brought back borders: for health reasons maybe, but borders are still back. Other people are once again looked at with fear and national policies for managing vaccine quotas have turned protectionist. The uninformed man in the street feels that the virus is proving that the EU is powerless to manage the crisis, and that fabled recovery plan is clearly not doing anything to keep him from going under. The man in the street does not know that the EU simply does not have any real role when it comes to health – but he can see that the EU has exported 34 million doses of vaccine despite shortages in the Member States and that the balance between States is in danger. Does he feel that Europe is absent? No, probably not. In the land of Louis Pasteur, the man in the street does not understand that national research, using public funds, was unable to develop a vaccine.

With the population worn down by the whole situation, surfacing from one lockdown only to be plunged down into another, there is a real danger that we will lose sight of our democratic values. Some people are latching on to conspiracy theories circulating on social media. Populists of every stripe are waiting to pounce.

For the national political situation is moving inexorably forward, with regional elections in June 2021 and presidential elections in 2022 – and the issues highlighted by the crisis will be at the heart of the debates.

In this time of uncertainty, you have to think very carefully about whether some freedoms should be given up in the name of protection, and for what type of protection. Assimilating public health with public safety is definitely a risk. Using new algorithms may be more effective today – but it can lead to increased population control tomorrow. Should we go as far as throwing people in prison for attending a party deemed to be «illegal» (a gathering of more than six people not wearing masks which takes place after curfew), as the national police has done?

France's Head of State is trying to establish a roadmap. One of his main priorities has always been to keep schools running, with pupils and students studying in person and/or remotely, so as to do the least possible amount of harm to young people and keep up their prospects. He is now saying that the virus is setting the pace. Having unswervingly followed the advice given by medical committees, he is now taking political decisions to try to get the country going again. 300 people are dying every day, but in early May he announced that some restrictions were being eased and set out a step-by-step plan for the summer, holidays and the tourism industry.

A political and economic mess

Whatever the cost, the French government decided very quickly to support businesses and workers sidelined by the lockdown. A raft of measures were taken, such as paying part of salaries, a solidarity fund, waiving social security contributions and granting loans – and it all cost around EUR 160 billion, 42 billion of which went on emergency measures in 2020. The public debt apparently reached 116.4% of GDP in the third quarter of 2020. Plus EUR 100 billion for the France relance plan. Some degree of purchasing power has been retained, but at microeconomic level so many families have been badly affected, including as always the most vulnerable and women.

There are a lot of questions begging answers: how can we slow down this haemorrhage of money? Who will pay the debt? What will the EU say about France not abiding by the Maastricht criteria?



How can we avoid leaving the crisis with society still more deeply divided and even greater wage disparities? Will workers agree to renewed discussions on the pensions and unemployment insurance reforms planned by the French government before the crisis knocked everything for six?

The crisis put social dialogue into hibernation until very recently.

We have three suggestions:

- return to intensive, genuine dialogue, with decision-makers truly paying attention to what is said;
- the ECB could abolish the Member States' debt, as the pandemic has had a very strong impact on all of them;
- vaccines could be made a common good for humanity.

The situation in India has once again shone a harsh light on the extent to which macroeconomic political choices buffet the lives of individuals.

We have seen society pulling together: through support for healthcare workers, through acts, through taxes and public funds. Solidarity between States has been in shorter supply, and public spiritedness on the part of big companies has yet to be demonstrated in the pharmaceutical sector. Public research funds were poured into the laboratories making the vaccines but those same laboratories are declining to share knowledge or patents. India makes and exports many vaccines; in its current dire situation it is now reversing that position and starting to keep the vaccines it makes for its own population. In countries which do not make vaccines and cannot afford to buy them, the virus is running rampant and variants will multiply – and medicine will be playing catch up. This affects all of us, if only in terms of whether we are free to move around.

So yes: vaccines should be a common good for humanity.

Laure BATUT, 1 May 2021

Europe 2021: in enforced search of time past



It would appear that Europe has started 2021 profoundly changed in a way that will mark it for a long time to come. Having for so long put off – if not forgotten about – radical reforms, it will no longer escape them and will have to bear all the consequences.

Goodbye Britain

The first change has probably also been the most expected. At the end of haggling as exhausting as it was impenetrable, the United Kingdom has finally left the European Union, inflicting upon itself a ricochet of secessionist disquiet.

The European Union, for its part, has demonstrated unwavering solidarity in this divorce, where many feared divisions or, worse still, a domino effect. There is no denying that this departure of the United Kingdom affects the specific gravity of the European Union. But it has the merit of making things clear: you cannot have your cake and eat it.

Maastricht urgently revisited

This clarification is timely. Because the other change, the one that we no longer expected, has been the releasing, following an improbable virus, of the other locks blocking the renovation. And so, in order to prevent the economy from buckling under the weight of an historic recession (a fall of 8% in 2020 for both the EU and France), the European Central Bank revised the curbs of Maastricht in its own way, brushing aside the objections of the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe. In this way, without worrying too much about interpretations of the treaties, it has unleashed EUR 1 300 billion, tenfold the annual EU budget, in the form of bond buybacks and liquidity injections.

Nor has the European Union been idle: breaking in turn the Maastricht codes, the crisis so transformed Chancellor Merkel out of all recognition that she was the first to bite into the forbidden fruit dangled by Macron: a project for a solidarity loan that had so long languished in the mire of a Siegfried line protecting her interests like her virtue. The only thing left to the president of the Commission, a compatriot contaminated by the transgression, was to compound the heresy to the tune of 750 billion. Even so, however, the 27 – more accustomed to murdering one another over a few million than so many billions – ended up by broadly endorsing it, at the end of a half-week marathon, at daybreak on a 21 July 2020 that will go down in the annals of the EU as its «night of 4 August»!

A new deal on the starry carpet

So a virus has dislocated the treaties' red lines, so assiduous in tying the resources of co-habitation first and foremost to the interests of the Member States. But «needs must», the 27 admitted in the end. The stock exchanges made the most of all these U-turns, catapulted into the high heavens, albeit artificial ones, after a close brush with hell.

And now? With the euro entrenched for the duration and at the same time solidarity blocked with no means of escape, and common expenditure suddenly exceeding non-borrowed funds, the European Union is obliged to move and innovate, after so many years lost in stagnation and conservatism.

A 2021-2027 budget with a false bottom

The UK is gone, but the 27 are doing more than just remaining loyal to the use – so practical – of its universal language. A clinging fragrance has also been left behind. Labelled frugal by some, stingy by others, a number of countries more well-heeled and less converted than others have wasted no time in grabbing back the fumes of July to resuscitate in December all of the «money back» spirit set in concrete by Margaret Thatcher.

Evidence of this are the choppy negotiations on the 2021-2027 European multiannual budget at the end of 2020, which capped it at EUR 1 074 billion (scarcely increased to 1 085 by the European Parliament with accounting transfers), in the customary vicinity of 1% of GDP, like the previous 2014-2020 budget of EUR 960 billion.

Admittedly, there is in addition the EUR 750 billion borrowed by the Commission, although the EUR 500 billion of grants originally proposed had already been reduced to EUR 390 billion by the «frugals» at the July marathon, with loans revalued from 250 to 360 to preserve the 750 envelope. This loan thus cracks for the first time the ceiling of 1% of GDP imposed on the European budget. But we are still far removed from 20% of the federal budget in the US, where the overall tax burden is a third lower than that imposed on Europeans, which in France even comes close to half of GDP!

An equation insoluble without innovation

From 2028 onwards, the 27 will have to start paying back instalments of the solidarity loan, which are binding on them until 2058. And while interest rates are now low, the loan will still have to be booked. Some economists or economists in name take pleasure in conjuring up mirages of debt cancellation despite the irreparable distrust and fissures that such a debate would inevitably create, shattering all confidence and ensuring the failure not only of the recovery but of the Union itself. The fact is it will have to be paid back, as the president of the ECB promptly pointed out.

To temper the official rhetoric, some will whisper that would imply first working out how to acquire the means of meeting repayments, even if the choice had to be made to keep rolling over the debt. The Commission has of course been busy presenting the loan as non-renewable, but what will the future be in a world where the balance of power is constantly changing? Jacques Chirac apparently said that in politics promises are only binding on those who receive them. Is there anything to say it will be different at European level? We could also construe François Mitterrand: one must leave time to time. To which we would add above all: but let us stop wasting it!

Innovating to put the loan to work

Now that Eurobonds have moved from fiction to fact, the question arises of how the Commission is best to manage them. Together with this, there is a long-avoided project that should be revived: should we not create a European «treasury» to better manage this common financial engineering in liaison with the ECB, even if it would have been more logical to think about this before rather than after?

It is also surprising that this European loan is not currently being advertised to all savers, as if it was intended to remain an exclusive preserve of high-finance insiders. Is the Commission not once again missing the opportunity to make Europe more relevant to its citizens?

All in all, how this big loan is used would have deserved a better debate. The redistribution of funds is currently governed by national quotas mainly directed towards the southern countries – which was, after all, part of the deal. Without in any way denying this imperative – merely «greened» by the 27 with environmental requirements – in the face of the health crisis, would it not have been useful to also open up the loan to innovative trans-European investments in order to respond to the common delays in integration, which has hardly been done?

Innovating to reconstitute the budget

The grafting on of the big loan will in any event skew the balance of the budget for a very long time. As of 2027, a 2028-2034 budget will have to be adopted that incorporates all the shared repayment obligations starting in 2028. For both revenue and expenditure this will require corresponding reforms.

As far as budget revenue is concerned, there will be few years in which to reconstitute and grow own resources without increasing the overall tax burden of a Europe that already leads the world. On the contrary: for the sake of our competitiveness and attractiveness it will be necessary to reduce this burden with economies of scale, while at the same time starting on tax harmonisation between countries, which is currently left untouched. A provisional tax timetable has already been outlined by the 27, targeting in particular plastics, carbon emissions, digital, financial transactions and corporate taxation. Also in the firing line are GAFA and other internet giants, who are still taking advantage of the gaping holes of our taxation disarray to enrich themselves on the cheap. These decisions will, of course, require unanimity, which explains why we have failed so far. But since all the Member States are now bound together in the loan, such unanimity will no longer be out of reach tomorrow!

As far as spending is concerned, it will no longer be possible to defer communitising duplicated national expenditure in a cost-effective and more efficient manner, even though credible integration requires resources to cover: Europe's security and defence, a unified customs administration, common matters concerning police, justice, civil protection, support for new technologies (digital, robotics, biotechnology, the environment). The 27 have placed particular emphasis on the climate challenge, but there will be no escaping the other shared priorities. Will we finally decide to set up a European fiscal institute to start assessing economies of scale, target projects and grade priorities?



Innovating to boost growth

Such a reorganisation of the Union budget would in itself lend significant support to Europe's much-needed growth, both in order to meet and then reduce its debt at the various levels and to regain its standing amid global competition. But we shall also not achieve this without a fundamental redirection of a number of common policies as currently managed by the European Commission.

European competition policy should be at the forefront of these reforms. In the face of a globalisation that is as inescapable as it is aggressive, the policy will now have to focus no longer on deterring but, on the contrary, on promoting the emergence and success of European champions, while giving this better support through intensification of transnational subcontracting networks with SMEs.

It is therefore high time to learn all the lessons from the tragic downgrading of European companies in the global competition in new technologies. Despite the laudable efforts of Commissioners Davignon and Bangeman, as far back as the 1980s, to marshal these companies around plans for the future, the blinkered obduracy of the Commission's Directorate-General for Competition in reining in these clusters at the «pre-competitive» stage and dissuading them on the operational and industrial front will have directly contributed to excluding Europeans from the new giants who now rein in the globalised world of the internet, online shopping, flat screens, smartphones, robots and other connected tools, while having forced these same Europeans, in so many cases, to sell their own patents, even their own brands, to the Americans, the Chinese, the Koreans and others.

With regard to a common foreign trade policy, which is now largely exposed to the four winds, it is also essential, beyond the all too often misleading and artificial attempts at reciprocity, to run it now to meet Europe's priority strategic, technological and security interests, as the United States, China and others have no qualms in doing.

Innovating to regain trust

Beyond all the merits of the big loan, which has enabled a stride forward as big as it was unexpected in the building of Europe, there is one remaining question that will condition what happens next: will the new obligations, both accounting and legal, which now bind our jointly indebted states be enough to compel them to make up, willy-nilly, for all the time lost?

The answer to this question will, of course, determine the fate of Europe's last chance to revive, complete and entrench its integration – in other words, to stake its claim in the move to globalisation and regain the trust of Europeans.

Bruno VEVER is secretary-general of the Jean Monnet Association and vice-president of Europe et Entreprises

The EESC and the future of the European Union



The European Union is at a crucial stage in its more than sixty-year history. After the completion of the Common Market and Monetary Union, two transforming achievements of Community integration, it is now at the stage of forming a political unit of a federal nature. This is a necessary aim to build on and give coherence to the past structural advances and to confront the unavoidable challenges of the present.

While at the beginning it was possible to move forwards on the basis of the «small steps» theory, after the major leaps forward outlined above and given the urgency of the decisions that need to be taken to establish the future, the EU is now faced with turning short-term measures - responding to the crisis - into a structural one: a comprehensive political architecture.

In reality, the Union has evolved less through small steps than through major crises: those arising from oil and inflation, the European monetary system, the crises caused by the «conservative revolution» and by debt and, now, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. And at times the EU has even taken a direction that contradicts its original aims, as happened with the neoliberal policies of the 1990s onwards and the radical austerity policies during the euro crisis. It does not seem sensible again to wait for the next major crisis to solve the structural flaws that besetting the Union, nor to return to the policies that have increased inequalities, broken the social contract and encouraged illiberal, anti-democratic, identity-based and Europhobic movements. Because, among other things, if we do not act now, there may not be another opportunity to act in time.

In my opinion, three factors would enable the EU to take a decisive step in this direction at the end of the current crisis. Firstly, the «revolutionary» measures adopted in July last year, such as the pooled debt, the freezing of the Stability Pact rules, the Reconstruction Fund, the increase in multiannual budgets and own resources and the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Going back to the previous ideas - as well as being inconsistent with the lessons of the previous crisis and with the investments that have been made and which would lose much of their effectiveness if not carried out - would make the European project considerably less attractive.

Secondly, because «going back to business as usual» would be strategic suicide in terms of defending the values and interests advocated by the EU. We live in a world in which inequalities are increasing, democracy is being questioned, and technological oligopolies are in danger of becoming a new «big brother» that controls our lives. Europe's much-vaunted «strategic autonomy», in its various aspects, including foreign policy, is impossible to carry out in each national sphere, let alone if Member States compete with each other in terms of taxation or pay.

The third factor is the United States' return to the ideas and values that underpin the European project. Forty years after Ronald Reagan began his term in office declaring that «government is the problem» and Margaret Thatcher opened hers with the slogan «the only economic policy possible», the policies announced by Joe Biden represent the other side of the Washington Consensus and the neoliberal policies that have guided the world for four decades. I am referring to his programme of investments, strengthening the American Welfare State, raising taxes on the highest earners, defending democratic values in his national and international policy, supporting trade unions, and returning to an ethical approach based on the common good to drive the economy. It is these values that gave birth to Roosevelt's Social Contract and to the European Community itself. This new scenario is something that can make a powerful contribution to the EU's move towards its own Renaissance and to shaping a form of globalisation that differs from the neoliberal model.

Against this backdrop, what role can the EESC play?

In my view, the EESC represents and contains important elements for the debate that will start in the coming days with the Conference on the Future of Europe. First of all, the EESC embodies some of the foundations of the EU itself, such as the participation of organised civil society in the Union's decision-making process, a concept that arose out of post-war European constitutionalism, and the desire to establish a social and democratic state based on the rule of law and social citizenship, alongside civil and political citizenship. The EESC also reflects the aspirations of the European Federal Movement, of which most drivers of the Community project were members, and which was explicitly in favour of creating both a European parliamentary authority and a consultative body for economic and social stakeholders.

As well as being a body that operates upstream of legislation and policy planning, the EESC has contributed and still contributes other «intangible values» to European integration. It has helped link civil society in the Member States with European institutions and policies; it has encouraged the creation and strengthening of European civil society organisations; it serves as a channel for the transmission of European policies to national levels; and it facilitates the dissemination of EU policies, values and cooperation to

civil societies in other parts of the world. The EESC has been a factor in the construction of the EU, in the Europeanisation of socio-economic organisations in the Member States, in European social dialogue, in the anticipation of consensus and in European citizenship. In short, the EESC is the most complete expression of European organised civil society.

In today's context, the EESC is just as necessary for European integration as the day it was created. As the expression of organised civil society, it has and can play a key role in bringing together, expressing and promoting the aspirations and consensus-based views of organised civil society on central issues such as the construction of a complete EU; the simultaneous development of the environmental and social transitions; industrial and technological policy; the creation and regulation of decent employment as the keystone of the new production model and social cohesion; the defence of democracy and the democratisation of the Union's governance; the construction of European citizenship; demographic challenges and the pact between generations and the establishment of a new form of globalisation that draws the necessary lessons from the pandemic. Above all, the EESC is a key institution for promoting the European ideal among civil society organisations and the citizens of the Union.

Like any organisation, the EESC, will therefore have to strengthen and improve its working methods, its structure - already considerably enlarged with the creation of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (heir to the ECSC Consultative Committee) and the Committee for Relations with the major European NGO networks - its dialogue and cooperation with the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council, and its links with the main European civil society networks.

The EESC will have to address, in a determined and educational way, the need to reverse the gradual devaluation of the role of participatory democracy and the role of organised civil society in the governance of the Union. This devaluation is a consequence of the shift from the Community method to the open method of coordination, of the decline in European-level legislative programmes, of the social dialogue itself as a consequence, and of the increase in conditional or binding 'guidelines' and online consultations.

In particular, the EESC should play an important role in reviving the European Social Contract, which underpins the environmental and technological transitions and the value of democracy itself. Just as the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War gave birth to the Keynesian pact and the progressive social contract as a response to the demand for peace and security in the face of a highly uncertain future. In the aftermath of the pandemic, it is even more obvious that the continued existence of the neoliberal social contract is harmful to the strength and preservation of democracy, and to the very functioning of the economy.

When talking about the response to the deep crisis created by this pandemic, we are referring in particular to the urgent need to change redistributive policies, i.e. the financing of the components of the Welfare State (healthcare, pensions, essential public services such as unemployment insurance, housing, transport, or benefits), social spending and, therefore, taxes. And, indeed, this is an essential component which, at the European level, is hampered by the lack of regulation, by tax havens and tax evasion, and by the greater real burden of taxes on middle and low incomes than on higher incomes. And by the unsustainable brake that is the unanimity rule for European fiscal integration.

In order to establish a comprehensive Social Contract, action is also needed on its other two elements: distribution and pre-distribution. Distribution covers the way in which companies' added value is divided up between wages, senior executives' salaries, shareholder dividends and taxes. This factor affects fundamental aspects of the rise in inequalities, such as job creation (the goal of full employment no longer features on government agendas), labour rights, corporate regulation geared to the common good rather than to maximising shareholder value, collective bargaining and the strength of the unions. But it is also essential to maintain purchasing power to sustain demand and the survival of businesses.

Pre-distribution, meanwhile, is about education and equal opportunities. These have an impact not only on employment opportunities, pay and careers, but also on increasing productivity, on the share of the business surplus and on reducing inequalities in income and wealth.

Returning to the aims of European social policies, the Social Contract and the principles of the social and democratic state based on the rule of law means returning to the aspiration of the first stage of European social policy: «equality in progress». It is essential to move beyond the subsequent stages, which went in the opposite direction: the «minimum requirements» of the 1980s and 1990s; the «competition between national social models», starting with the Bolkestein Directive of 2004; the «European governance of national social policies» starting with that Directive, the various judgments that gave precedence to the right of establishment over fundamental labour rights, and the policies linked to the Stability and Growth Pact in the wake of the financial crisis. In short, in order to avoid social competition in the EU, what is needed is European social integration and a new economic paradigm.

European civil society has a great deal to say on these matters, and the EESC should therefore be its voice, cutting across all sectors, with the broadest possible consensus, to promote this debate and provide responses to it.

José María ZUFIAUR,
Former EESC member representing UGT, Spain.

An opportunity for more Europe

During the course of European integration, Europe experienced a period of greatness that will not be forgotten. We are talking, essentially, about a twenty-year period just before and following on from the collapse of the Soviet bloc (1989), and the dissolution of the two-pole system of governance, which was the global order of the time.

During these years, European integration was characterised by a continual and sincere effort by almost all Member States of the Union at the time to deepen and complete European integration.

Moreover, during that period, the Union was no longer playing a leading role in ensuring political and military balance in the world, which left it free to develop continuously and comfortably, cultivating creativity in all productive and non-productive sectors. All, that is, except those which maintained and monitored the balance of the world's political and military structure.

With the welcome overturning of this balance of terror, the world began to seek a new geopolitical equilibrium, building a completely new global order. Europe played an important role in this quest, which lasted more than a decade.

It was precisely during those years that everything seemed to mark Europe out as a beacon for the rest of the world. It was a Europe accepted by all, called to play a landmark role in humankind's journey in the run up to and throughout the 21st century. In addition to its previous achievements, Europe was guaranteed to have a specific role due to the prospects opened up by a single currency (euro) and its far-reaching enlargement to the east and south, including Cyprus. More specifically, Europe's role was secured by the prospects afforded by the adoption of its first constitution.

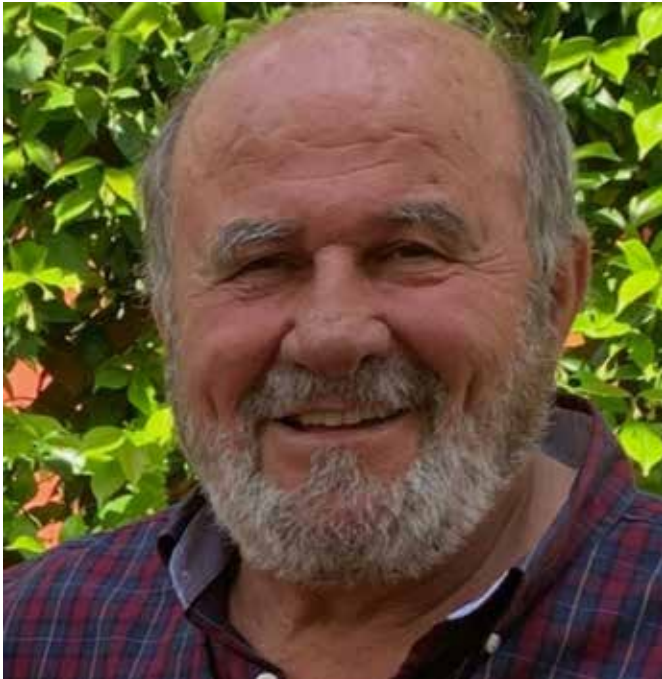
A missed opportunity

Unlike the EU's successes at the time of its major enlargement and introduction of the euro, the promise of real greatness that would come from having its own constitution did not materialise. Despite serious and lively discussions between all the key players that shaped Europe's plans for the future and a draft constitution that was impressive for its time, the prospect of deepening the Union was rejected for micropolitical reasons by the respective referendums in France and the Netherlands (2005).

The EU thus moved into this new globalisation era with the same governance model as before, operating at the same pace and speed as it had in the past. In other words, with exactly what it needed to change in order to operate effectively and competitively in this new global environment.

As a result of this incompatibility, the EU lost many of the advantages that it had had up to then over other regional blocs in the world. Firstly, it lost the advantage of the single internal market, which was largely replaced by the new opening-up of the global economy. It also lost its democratic advantage, after accepting the unconditional and unlimited participation of all in the new global economic situation. Then it missed the opportunity to become a global regulator in terms of new global geopolitical, military and energy balances. Finally, it missed the most important opportunity of all: to harness the technological progress of the new era to promote European integration. In other words, to foster its European identity and to promote its political and social achievements on a global scale.

That is where we are today. At a point where Europe, despite its cultural contribution to humankind's development, its economic capacity and its population size, tends to lag behind in global developments, struggling to maintain a position of regional power. It is far from achieving its original potential or from being a frontrunner in the overcrowded race between those who are now in a position to claim a leading role in the global balance of powers of the 21st century.



The causes

When the process of building of the new global order began, many of us believed that the EU could play a key role in shaping the operational features of new global governance. At the same time, we saw the risks ahead threatening its accomplishments and we fought with all our might to consolidate them internally and to promote them internationally as universal building blocks or values, to underpin the new global order.

Unfortunately, we failed. We failed because, before and after the referendums, certain internal forces could not accept a Union that was the common, powerful voice of European citizens. Nor could they accept a European identity that was stronger than their national identity. Finally, they could not understand the new major global orders that had emerged or how they would affect their values, shape their daily lives and impact their future prospects.

So, instead of accepting a strong Union, speaking with a common voice, internally and externally, and expressing its advantages, they paved the way for the new world order to be based on a single principle: consumerism. A principle that collapsed the first time it came under attack, from a virus ... COVID-19 and its variants.

A second chance to relaunch

Thus, today, after our experience of Trump's governance in the USA; today, now that we are familiar with the forces at play and the pace and speed of the new global order; today, after our experience with Brexit, Sofagate and the chaos that has followed COVID-19 ...

Today, with the reopening of the debate on the future of Europe, it is time to take a few steps back - back to where we left our greatness behind. To the early years of our millennium.

We can go back there now, having learnt from our mistakes, to restart our journey to the future, basing it on what we were seeking and what we lost at the time. On the prospect of:

- a strong European citizens' Union, with a constitution and a federal system of governance;
- a Union that serves its people, cultivating and promoting its political, social, economic and cultural achievements;
- a Union with significant demographic weight in the world, distinguished by its development and production and admired by all for its culture and way of operating;
- and lastly, a Union that deserves respect and security, both within its alliances and within its own ranks.

This time, our relaunch for more Europe must succeed. And it will succeed, if we work more carefully and more democratically with one another in a more united and ultimately, more European way.

Christoforos KORYFIDIS

April 2021

In focus: the Conference on the Future of Europe



Minding the gap - the in-between approach

How to bridge the considerable gap between the EU institutions and the people is a topic that is always on the table. The CoFE is a new attempt to raise people's awareness and engage them in European decisions. Macroregions - a relatively new EU policymaking field - with their hidden potential, serve as interfaces between the EU and the people and that role should be capitalised on. The initiative will encourage and equip civil society organisations from the four macroregions to contribute to the Conference's debates, which will also help them to position themselves better in macroregional policymaking.

The idea behind the Conference

Civil society organisations from the four macroregions (Baltic, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine regions) will join forces to contribute to the discussions of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE). The CoFE is a major new initiative of the three main EU institutions: the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Its primary objective is to decide on the course Europe should take to navigate the many critical challenges ahead. The CoFE will be launched on Europe Day (9 May) in Strasbourg, it will encompass multiple European, national, regional and local activities and its conclusion is planned for late spring in 2022. The whole exercise will be people-centred and its main communication tool is a multilingual online platform that is already up and running in the 24 EU languages: <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>.

What the in-between initiative can do

As an open, collaborative macroregional civil platform for the Conference on the Future of Europe, the in-between initiative:

- participates in and contributes to the CoFE's ongoing public debate;
- broadens the circle of participants in the Conference's debates;
- increases public awareness of EU policymaking regarding the future of Europe; facilitates sharing of ideas, vision and experience;
- drafts joint proposals and measures;
- promotes contact and joint horizontal programmes amongst civil society organisations in the four macroregions;
- encourages similar initiatives by other stakeholders from the four macroregions, and presents its activities at macroregional events.

For further information please contact:
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PeaceBread



Intensive discussion at PeaceBread, with EESC participation

Support for PeaceBread in hybrid format

Agriculture needs peace – Peace causes remembrance – Remembrance creates values

«Then the crop was harvested, and in a ceremony attended here by leaders and families, it was baked into bread. Special bread to remember the blood spilt and to remind people of the value of peace, both materially and spiritually. I was given a handful of the flour and I'll Treasure it, to remind me that it is important to remember and that we have, as Europeans citizens, voici in common and a great deal to deal to defend».

This is an extract from *In Between*, written by farmer Tom Jones from Wales, who was a member of the EESC for a number of years. Mr Jones was part of a NAT delegation that went to Berlin during Green Week and also visited the famous Berlin Wall memorial on Bernauer Straße, where he learnt about the European project PeaceBread (FriedensBrot).

PeaceBread was founded in 2012. Along with 12 partner countries from along the former Iron Curtain, the association focuses on the contribution of sustainable agriculture to peacekeeping. This includes establishing and maintaining an extensive network. The annual highlight is a conference that includes ministerial meetings, a civil society assembly and a formal public PeaceBread ceremony. The public launch on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain in Berlin in 2014 was a great success. An EESC delegation, including the then EESC presidents Staffan Nilsson and Henri Malosse, has been actively involved in every conference since then, each of which has taken place in a different country. Every conference, whether in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Estonia and Latvia or Lithuania, has attracted public attention and involved political and civil society partners from the 12 countries that have a shared experience of separation and trauma due to the Iron Curtain.



When in-person events were still possible – here, in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2019

However, the COVID-19 pandemic largely disrupted the PeaceBread activities planned for 2020, which is why the European conference could not take place either. That will not be the case this year. Romania will be the host country in 2021. The key stakeholders are the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Romanian Association of Former Bărăgan Deportees and the PeaceBread association in Berlin. The conference is likely to be in hybrid format, i.e. a small delegation from Romania will be at the conference venue, supported by a delegation from PeaceBread. All other participants and speakers will participate digitally in the conference. As has proven to be best practice at all conferences, the host country proposes the key topics for both the political component and the civil society programme. The most recent «Peace and Agriculture» conference, which took place in Vilnius, Lithuania, focused on sustainability and climate change and on the future of the young generation. In light of the experience of the pandemic, the importance of food security will also need to be reassessed.

The rye that is used in the European formal PeaceBread ceremony has been growing for a long time. Each partner country sends an agreed amount of breadmaking rye to the host country, where it is mixed, milled and baked into peace bread. In Berlin, there is a small rye field at the Berlin Wall memorial on the former «death strip» that is managed by Humboldt University. The members of PeaceBread are personalities from associations, academia, the church and educational institutions. The patron is Federal Minister for Agriculture Julia Klöckner.

Our long-standing EESC colleague Adalbert Kienle has managed to ensure that the EESC – in particular the NAT section – has been interested in the European PeaceBread project and actively involved in the annual conferences since the beginning. Hajo Wilms, vice-president of the EESC at the time, was honoured in the Chapel of Reconciliation near the small rye field. Mr Kienle is leaving the Board of PeaceBread after many years of collaboration but hopes and wishes, as a «PeaceBread ambassador», that the EESC and its NAT section will support the European PeaceBread conference in 2021 and following years through active participation and cooperation. As the pandemic abates, PeaceBread will re-establish contact with the EESC.

Adalbert KIENTLE, Berlin



The Brexit: a disaster



It is nearly five years since the UK voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. To me it was a horror story. At the end of 2019 an agreement was reached between the EU and the UK - the «Withdrawal Agreement» – under which the UK would formally leave the EU at the end of January 2020 with a transitional period until the end of 2020, concluding with an EU-UK free trade agreement.

This was the end of long and tortuous period with dramatic events along the way. There were expected and unexpected developments. There were profound divisions in the UK within political parties and the public generally ... and then COVID.

One issue was both expected and unexpected – that of the Northern Ireland border. It was expected in that former Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and former Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, had visited Northern Ireland during the referendum, emphasising that by creating a border between north and south Brexit would endanger the Good Friday Agreement, which had removed border controls with considerable benefit in terms of peace in Northern Ireland. This was backed up by the Northern Ireland vote in the referendum, with a majority in favour of staying in the European Union.

However, it was not expected that the issue would become so dominant or play a major part in the resignation of a UK prime minister and, eventually, the resignation of the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is continuing to cause disputes between the UK and the EU.

Clearly, the difficulty arose because of the incompatibility with the single market and the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The solution - a trade border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - could be described as the worst possible in the absence of any other. However, as it is not supported by the

main political party - the Democratic Unionists - it has led to more unrest in Northern Ireland and a search for better solutions cannot, therefore, be ruled out. In that context, it is clear from statements from both the UK and the Irish government that they do not contemplate unification of Ireland for the foreseeable future as an answer. Moreover, work will be needed to ensure that goods and services continue to be provided and enable people to move easily across borders.

Brexit also affected other parts of the UK. Scotland voted to remain in the EU. Consequently, the result has provided a further nudge towards Scottish independence (which I regard as disastrous for the UK and for Scotland.)

Wales voted for Brexit, despite much of Wales benefiting considerably from the EU Structural Funds. Also, although a significant proportion of workers voted for Brexit, a number of areas, particularly in the north of England, did not vote for Labour in the December 2019 general election as they would have traditionally, but for the Conservative government. This extraordinary shift was compounded by a further win in a strong by-election victory for the Conservatives in the traditional Labour stronghold of Hartlepool. There is expected to be an increase in funding for economic development in these areas.

Obviously, this has implications for business, trade unions and all the interests represented in the EESC. All played their part in the referendum. Clearly, most had supported the Remain campaign, but there were also significant exceptions such as a major trade union, small businesses and fishermen. Although the National Farmers Union supported Remain, the majority of farmers did not. (The arrangements now in place for farmers are geared for the time being to ensuring they receive the same deal as EU farmers but with much more for «environment» expenditure.)

Since the referendum, business could have been more active and vocal about the Brexit negotiations. I regularly found myself talking to business leaders and managers who moaned extensively about Brexit and the government's handling of the negotiations. However, when asked if they had made this clear to the government or would state their views publicly they became more reticent. That said, in the weeks before the conclusion of the trade agreement in December 2020 when no deal seemed likely, many panicked and became more outspoken, which may have played a part in pushing the government to make compromises.



The final agreement on a free trade area was based on the principle of a level playing field and fair competition, allowing the UK to negotiate its own trade agreements with non-EU countries. I suspect many businesses would have preferred an agreement based on EU rules. Nevertheless, for many Brexit supporters, not least in government, this solution would have meant appealing to the European Court of Justice, which they regarded as a vehicle for continuing European integration. Thus, the agreement was based on «equivalence», with an array of EU/UK groups to monitor and make changes where necessary. One of the concerns here is the extent of proper democratic accountability, which I suggest both the European Parliament and, indeed, the EESC should consider.

It follows that the UK is now able to negotiate with third countries. In practice, these negotiations started long before the agreement, albeit informally. Most of the agreements are largely a reproduction of the EU agreements with the country concerned in the form of a UK agreement – i.e. with some differences but much the same. The more interesting agreements will be where the UK and/or the third countries want significant changes. For example, Australia will look to export more agricultural products to the UK. I would expect the EU institutions to be watching these agreements carefully.

The EU-UK trade agreement and the trade agreements between the UK and third countries were negotiated during the COVID period. While clearly creating difficulties, agreements have been reached. COVID has, of course, affected the transport of goods between the UK and the EU. However, the new-post-Brexit procedures and paperwork have also clearly affected trade. So far

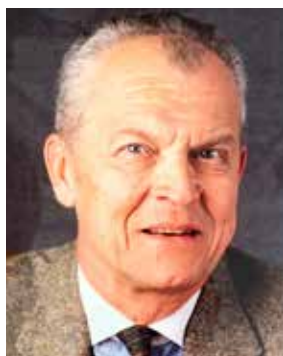
it has been difficult to make a clear judgment about the effect on trade between the EU and the UK, but it appears that the added difficulties of Brexit have affected exports by small businesses. Furthermore, some businesses which export a small share of their production across the EU-UK border have reduced or ceased such trade.

There are many loose ends still to tie up. I would single out financial services, where there are concerns of operations moving from the City of London to mainland Europe. A lot of work is still needed on security and aviation. Is anything being done to implement the political declaration that was signed at the time of the Withdrawal Agreement, notably with regard to foreign policy? Indeed, what follow-up has there been to the line in the declaration - of interest to the EESC - about encouraging civil society dialogue?!

So where are EU-UK relations now? After the signing of the trade deal there was much bragging about future relations. Yet within a month, the President of the Commission was threatening to block vaccine exports to Britain - not her finest hour! At the time of writing, on the two hundredth anniversary of the death of Napoleon, France is threatening to cut electricity supply to Jersey and the UK is dispatching gunboats to the island in a dispute which seems to be about paperwork. EU-UK relations will survive. But Brexit is still a horror story.

Robert MORELAND

Economic, Social and Environmental Council 2021 Reform in France



The Economic, Social and Environmental Council is one of the three assemblies provided for under the French Constitution alongside the National Assembly and the Senate, which make up the Parliament. Unlike the latter, which vote on laws, its role is advisory.

The French ESEC was amended by law in January 2021. The purpose of this article is to present the main elements of this reform.

We are witnessing a general evolution in democracy. Our citizens increasingly want to make their voices heard when decisions are being taken by their elected representatives. How can this desire to participate be taken into account? The ESEC reform of January 2021 seeks to provide an initial response.

Background

In the interwar period, the French Government set up an informal economic council bringing together representatives of businesses and employees.

In 1946, in the aftermath of the Second World War and led by General de Gaulle, the new French Constitution provided an institutional framework for this Council, making it one of the three constitutional assemblies. The Economic Council was born, responsible for informing the Government mainly about economic policy.

Still under the leadership of General de Gaulle who had returned to power, a new Constitution was adopted in 1958. It gave a social dimension to the Economic Council, becoming the Economic and Social Council. France would later call for such a council to be set up at European level.

There was a fresh constitutional amendment in 2008, initiated by President Nicolas Sarkozy. Aware of the importance of environmental issues, the president called for such issues to be brought within the remit of the Council. It became the Economic, Social and Environmental Council. Its membership took account of this new dimension, with a new obligation of gender parity.

The ESEC then had three main pillars. One representing economic life and social dialogue (employees and employers), one bringing together stakeholders in social and territorial cohesion, and one for organisations involved in protecting nature and the environment. In addition to these three pillars, there was a group of experts appointed by the Government on a discretionary basis. A total of 233 members were based in the Palais d'Iéna, a masterpiece of modern architecture by Auguste Perret.

The ESEC issues opinions in the areas coming under its remit. Matters are referred to it in three different ways. First, at the request of the Government or the Parliament. Second, following a citizens' petition with at least 500 000 signatures. Finally, on its own initiative. It should be noted that there is a major difference with the European ESC: save in some exceptional cases, there is no obligation for the government or Parliament to consult the ESEC on draft legislation.

In most cases, laws are passed without consulting the ESEC. In addition, in ten years only one citizens' petition has received more than 500 000 signatures. Most ESEC opinions are therefore own-initiative opinions. However, on the positive side, one third of the proposals included in the opinions are taken up in legislation.

Opinions are voted on in the general assembly after being drawn up in sections, which provide considerable scope for hearings with experts. The opinions raise questions for public authorities on matters coming under their remit, but also all civil society actors. As far as possible, they form part of a sustainable development perspective.

The ESEC's culture is one of achieving consensus or, at the very least, a large majority on each subject. This is undoubtedly its great added value, and is reflected in the opinions available on the ESEC website (www.lecese.fr).

The January 2021 reform

A debate is under way between representative and participatory democracy. Our Western countries are organised on the basis of representative democracy. Periodically, we elect representatives responsible for legislating and governing. Yet we see a growing desire on the part of people to be directly involved in decisions taken between elections. Citizens want their voices to be heard without an intermediary. To put it clearly, what is the place for participatory democracy alongside representative democracy?

The French President Emmanuel Macron wanted an ambitious reform to transform the ESEC into a «council for citizen participation». It would have been largely composed of citizens representing civil society. It would have also needed to be consulted, prior to any parliamentary debate in its areas of competence (social, economic and environmental). President Macron had to abandon this idea. It involved constitutional reform, with the development of the ESEC not being the only objective. Voting on such a reform requires a qualified majority in Parliament (three fifth of the members). The conditions were not met. He therefore embarked on a reform limited to what could be amended by law without changing the Constitution. The aim remained the same: to broaden the ESEC to include as many components of civil society as possible, and to initiate direct participation by citizens. This objective is reflected in the membership and functioning of the future ESEC.

The number of members has been reduced, from 233 to 177, but the government has given up the forty members it appointed on a discretionary basis. The previous three main pillars are retained with, however, major changes. The number of representatives of employees and enterprises has been significantly reduced. In return, the number of representatives of the other components of civil society, in particular «nature and environment», has been increased. The obligation of gender parity is, of course, kept in place. Finally, a code of conduct will be drawn up to avoid conflicts of interest. It will apply to all members.

The introduction of arrangements for participatory democracy is clearer in the way the future Council is organised.

The procedures for referrals remain the same, with one notable exception. The referral by citizens' petition has been made more flexible, with 150 000 signatures being sufficient. The age of petitioners is lowered from eighteen to sixteen. Finally, signatures will be collected electronically. A significant increase in this method of referral can therefore be expected.

Obligatory referral prior to any draft law was not taken up by Parliament. Personally, having appreciated and experienced first-hand the added value of the European ESC in the process of drafting directives and regulations, I deeply regret this. But it was clear that parliamentarians were opposed, who wrongly believed that it would undermine their legitimacy as elected representatives. It should be noted, however, that a procedure for the approval of urgent opinions (three weeks) is in place. This should make it easier for the public authorities to consult the ESEC, as it is more in line with the parliamentary timetable. Let us hope that this will be the case.

In organising its work, the ESEC may decide to involve citizens, chosen at random, from among the people concerned by the subject of an opinion. Their views remain advisory, but their opinion will be made public. The ESEC may also seek the views of organisations involved in local life, if the subject so warrants. This includes regional economic and social councils.

The ESEC may also take the initiative, if it considers it useful on a particular subject, to set up a citizens' convention, again made up of citizens chosen at random. The aim is to give the floor to a group of citizens, while ensuring that the arrangements for random selection and organisation of work guarantee transparency and independence. The ESEC will also be responsible for organising the citizens' conventions that the government decides to consult. It will build on the experience gained over the past two years.

Conclusion

The limited nature of this reform is a matter of regret. It is disappointing that there is no obligation to include the French ESEC in the legislative process, unlike the European ESC. Its legitimacy would have been greatly enhanced as a result. But the French ESEC can become a laboratory for participatory democracy for the benefit of all in Europe, at a time when it is more urgent than ever for citizens to take ownership of Europe. This is one of the reasons why there should be closer cooperation between the European ESC and its national counterparts, including between our associations (www.amicale-cese.fr). I hope this modest contribution goes some way towards achieving this.

Pierre Simon

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