European celebration and renewal

On 9 May, we will all be asked to celebrate Europe Day as we do on this date every year. The celebration marks the anniversary of the Robert Schuman declaration; a historic statement, which reminds us of the importance of peace in Europe and the role that unity plays in maintaining it in our everyday lives. Delivered in 1950, the declaration sought to begin a process which would see the building of peace on a continent that produced two devastating wars in the first part of the 20th century. For many citizens, the idea that this could never happen again is easy to believe. However, the scourge of a very selfish driven nationalism, is never far away and any overview of European history will demonstrate that wars have been a frequent part of our history.

The declaration states that “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity”.

In this statement there is a clear indication that the progression of the European Union is slow and not without difficulty. Its detractors have frequently predicted that the Union will not last and continually point out its failings. On European Day it will be useful to reflect on the huge achievements of the Union. Such reflection will need to examine the extent of the peace dividend and the massive progression of equal rights, social and economic inclusion that has been delivered. Of course, bearing in mind the Schuman observation that Europe will not be made all at once, we will have to intensify our work in ensuring that we have a Europe that guarantees the rights of citizens.

It is in this context that the forthcoming launching of the Conference on the Future of the European Union on 9 May and the Porto Social Summit just before, are extremely welcome. Together, these events will set the European agenda for the next ten years, with a view to dealing with the challenges linked to the current crisis and more and ensuring that we as a Union will better manage the challenges, particularly those linked to the principle of leaving no one behind.

At our conference in March we were presented with so many examples of solidarity as demonstrated by a multitude of civil society organisations during the pandemic. Such solidarity referred to by Schuman is the primary requirement in managing a crisis. As Members of the Diversity Europe Group, we believe that as a first step to ensuring that no one is left behind, civil society organisations should be included in all policy planning. Otherwise the many communities which are often left behind will continue to be ignored.

In the April issue of our newsletter, read about Members expectations of, proposals and demands for the European Summit in Porto. It is with great pleasure that I announce a guest comment on the very same issue by Luís Alberto Silva, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies. Happy reading and Happy Europe Day.

Séamus Boland
President of the Diversity Europe Group
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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Europe’s Social Summit: boosting employment and the social economy.

Luis Alberto SILVA
Chairman of the Board of Directors,
Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies

The pandemic we are currently going through will leave Europe and the world grappling with the need to kick-start an economic and social recovery process that is fair, inclusive and resilient and that secures the climate and digital transitions.

While the importance of a strong social Europe was already clear in 2017, when European leaders endorsed the European Pillar of Social Rights in Gothenburg, Sweden, it has become urgent as a result of the pandemic, which has exacerbated social inequalities.

This is the time for Europe to give due prominence to the role of the social economy as a factor for progress and development in its regions, as a generator of employment, as a promoter of inclusion and as a driver of a human-centred culture, now that it seems to be making some progress in this area.

The Porto Summit, at the height of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, is an excellent opportunity for the European Union to embark on a journey towards an economically and socially strong and cohesive Europe that guarantees its citizens a life of dignity, stability, well-being, social protection and hope for the future.

The Action Plan that forms part of this European Pillar of Social Rights designed by the European Commission, while not perfect, is a step in the right direction, making employment and skills development a top priority and promoting the social economy as a vector for the creation of paid and qualified jobs, at the same time as tackling the main social challenges.

In Portugal, the social economy accounts for 6.4 per cent of employment, and this trend is growing. The members of the Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies look forward to seeing how committed European leaders are to meeting the objectives set by the Commission. It would be good to secure European consensus on support for investment in the social economy, in the equipment and new social responses and skills of its human resources, and for the environmental and digital transitions.

It is imperative to strengthen the social sector’s ability to act, as it is an extremely important partner of the Member States in limiting the impact of all crises, such as the current one. At the same time, it is essential to invest in measures and financial instruments that pave the way for the sector’s sustainability.

We believe that mutual societies should have their say in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Mutual societies are part of the social economy family and can contribute to a more social Europe. They have over the centuries proved their resilience and ability to adapt to different situations. In a Europe of the 21st century, marked by so many uncertainties, the mutual fund model remains a modern, virtuous and forward-looking response to issues of social protection, welfare and health.

Social Economy and Disability: the new European Disability Strategy builds upon the EESC’s work

PhD Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES)
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Director of Alliances and Social and International Relations, Fundación ONCE

At the beginning of March, the European Commission adopted the new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. Apart from the increasing mainstreaming of disability across the EU policy spectrum, one of its main features is the strong focus that the Commission places on the role that the social economy already plays and can further play for the full integration of people with disabilities into the labour market and society as a whole.

All of this comes as no surprise for the EESC. The Committee was the first EU body to make this connection. For a number of years and through a variety of outputs (opinions, studies, conference conclusions and even opinion pieces in this newsletter), the Committee has been calling on the Commission, the European Parliament and the national governments to further support and enable the role that social economy plays in the integration of people with disabilities.

Even if our proposals have taken some years to materialise and become integrated into a fully-fledged Commission strategic document, this breakthrough is collectively satisfying. I also see it as an institutional recognition of the important role the Committee plays in terms of thought leadership and prospective thinking for the benefit of all EU citizens – in this particular case, for the benefit of the 87 million European citizens that have a disability.

It is also a recognition and a testament to the social economy sector. Now that diversity and inclusion (D&I) is being placed higher on the corporate agenda, it is fair to remember that, for decades, if not centuries, D&I has been a central part of social economy enterprises’ DNA and way of doing business. In this regard, I hope that the next EU Summit in Porto creates real opportunities for both civil society and institutions to fulfil our joint commitment to boost the social economy as a sector that greatly contributes to inclusive and sustainable development.

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2. EESC, opinions, https://europa.eu/!wF86wY
3. EESC, studies, https://europa.eu/!wF86wY
4. EESC, Diversity Europe Newsletter, https://europa.eu/!cM84nM
VULNERABLE CONSUMERS: efforts must be made to eradicate social exclusion

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES)
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Member, Spanish Consumers’ and Users’ Council (CCU)

Vulnerability can stem from social circumstances or particular characteristics of individual consumers or groups of consumers, such as their age, gender, state of health, digital literacy, numeracy skills or economic situation.

All these factors can increase a consumer’s risk of being socially excluded or limit their interactions. Although these forms of vulnerability have been exacerbated by the pandemic, they are independent of it.

In view of the upcoming Social Summit of Heads of State and Government in Porto, I call for further and enhanced efforts to be made to eradicate these forms of social exclusion, which civil society organisations can alleviate through their work. For example, the financial vulnerability of many EU households is worrying and can lead to discrimination due to the use of biased algorithms.

Affordability is crucial in ensuring that low-income consumers have access to products and services, with social protection measures being used to support people with modest incomes, in particular to meet needs as fundamental as their access to basic and essential services, despite, for example, their energy insecurity.

Older people and people with disabilities have specific needs as consumers and other groups may be cut off from the benefits of a digital society and become newly excluded groups.

Finally, effective equal treatment between men and women must be ensured in terms of access to goods and services. Denying pregnant women credit services because they may lose their income and excluding single mothers from certain financial services on the grounds of an increased risk of default is unacceptable.

Enhancing the EU’s Social Pillar can provide the means required to prevent these types of situations from occurring and avoid a “multi-speed” society. I hope that the Porto Summit will give new impetus to the implementation of the Social Pillar.

European Child Guarantee: A chance to place children and their families at the heart of the COVID-19 recovery

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

On 24 March 2021, the European Commission published the European Child Guarantee1, a policy initiative framed in the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The Guarantee puts Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights2 on “Childcare and support to children” into action and is therefore a key deliverable of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan3, setting out concrete initiatives to turn the Pillar into reality. The proposal is a milestone that needs to be used as a catalyst to rethink and reformulate national child and family supports in the EU and I hope that at the Social Summit4 in Porto EU leaders will recognise this.

Further due to the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. It means that almost 1 in 4 children in the EU are growing up without eating a daily hot, nutritious meal, live in inadequate housing conditions, are unable to fully attend school due to hidden and extra costs such as school trips or school meals, etc. 1 in 4 children in the EU grow up in vulnerable families that need support to break the cycle of poverty.

18 million children or 22.2% of children in the EU were growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion according to Eurostat data from 2019 and this figure is likely to increase further due to the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. It means that almost 1 in 4 children in the EU are growing up without eating a daily hot, nutritious meal, live in inadequate housing conditions, are unable to fully attend school due to hidden and extra costs such as school trips or school meals, etc. 1 in 4 children in the EU grow up in vulnerable families that need support to break the cycle of poverty.

In the proposal for a Council Recommendation to establish a European Child Guarantee, the Commission strongly encourages Member States to address child social exclusion as a matter of priority. Member States are called upon to guarantee for all children – especially those in need – free access to services such as early childhood education and care. The target groups (“children in need”) of the national plans are to be defined by Member States, but there is key guidance in the Recommendation.

In addition to the Child Guarantee, the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) includes a specific objective and earmarking aimed at fighting child poverty. EU Member States’ agreement on the new ESF in January 2021 must now be followed by a swift endorsement of the Child Guarantee.

The EESC has already started drafting its opinion on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child/Child Guarantee for adoption at the plenary session in July 2021.

For more information and resources please refer to:
EU Alliance for Investing in Children statement on the European Commission’s proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the Child Guarantee7

COFACE: European Child Guarantee: Putting children and their families at the centre of the COVID-19 recovery plans8

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6. EESC, opinion SOC/682, https://europa.eu/!py44YY
Energy poverty at the crossroads of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Green Deal

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Over the last decade, the EESC has been encouraging coordinated European measures, in line with the subsidiarity principle, to prevent and combat energy poverty, promote solidarity in this area and offer greater protection to the most vulnerable, on the basis of the universal right of access to energy.

Opinions drawn up by the Section for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN') have called for the creation of the EU Energy Poverty Observatory and for all stakeholders to be involved in helping to set indicators, make an inventory of the situation, identify best practices and draw up recommendations. The TEN section has drawn up an information report evaluating the European Energy Union², focusing on the social and societal dimension of the energy transition, including energy poverty, and suggesting that the European Commission could set a target of zero energy poverty in the EU by 2030. The section has also welcomed the European Commission’s proposal for a Renovation Wave³, as part of a holistic approach to long-term investment in the general interest, sustainable development, the green transition and full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights⁴.

Leaving no one behind, achieving a green and just transition and fully implementing the Social Pillar means tackling concrete problems, and there are fewer problems as real as energy poverty and as urgent as fighting against it. The health and social dimensions of energy poverty show that the issue cannot be viewed solely in terms of energy but also requires cross-cutting solutions with social and environmental impacts. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking action on energy poverty must also contribute to the recovery.

Therefore, the TEN section, together with SOC and NAT sections⁵, hosted a conference⁶ on Energy poverty at the crossroads of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Green Deal⁷ (on 20 April 2021). This was an opportunity to focus on how the EU, national, regional and local authorities, as well as organised civil society, can join forces and identify the practical steps to be taken.

Europe needs to build a strong narrative on energy poverty, making it a priority issue in both the European Green Deal⁷ and the European Pillar of Social Rights, and must stress this commitment at the May 2021 Social Summit in Porto.

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1. EESC, TEN section, https://europa.eu/!kn94lxk
2. EESC, opinion TEN/702, https://europa.eu/!m37qio
3. EESC, opinion TEN/723, https://europa.eu/!tp/7eqg
5. The SOC section is the EESC’s Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship. The NAT section is the EESC’s Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment.
The Portuguese Presidency has come at a crucial time. Never has there been more demand from EU citizens for the EU to step up its role in creating a more social Europe. We are in the midst of not one, but multiple crises. We are living through what is undoubtedly the greatest public health crisis we will experience in our lifetimes, an ensuing financial crisis and, as a natural consequence, a devastating social crisis.

All our attention is therefore focused on the Porto Social Summit at the beginning of May, and expectations are high. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us an important lesson. While Member States want to protect their competences in the areas of social and health policies, Europe’s fragmented responses on these fronts are proving to be its weakness. So, as well as focusing on the European Pillar of Social Rights and its new Action Plan in Porto, we also want to see a real, in-depth and serious discussion around the issue of subsidiarity and how the EU and the Member States divide their policy competences.

National pride should not stand in the way of progress. It is time for the EU to challenge the Member States to do better to protect their citizens and improve their quality of life in a sustainable and inclusive way. We want the EU to have the remit to lead the way when it comes to building a better Europe based on equality: a Europe in which our quality of life is enhanced by the certainty that no matter where we are from, what languages we speak, what colour our skin is, what gender we are, whether or not we have a disability, or who we love, we will have our rights protected just like anyone else.

The Porto Social Summit will take place on 7 and 8 May. More information on the event can be found on the website of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union at: https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/porto-social-summit/

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Europe is one of the best places on earth to be born. To grow up, to work, to live, to love. Europe is not just a random group of neighbouring countries that decided to open up their markets. It is a continent that shares an eventful history, as well as common interests, but maybe most importantly values. And it is this community of values and fundamental rights on which the recent LGBTIQ Equality Strategy for 2020-2025, adopted by the European Commission in November 2020, has been built. Every citizen of Europe should be able to live in safety and freedom. Obviously LGBTIQ people should also enjoy safety and freedom. But unfortunately, this is not always that obvious. LGBTIQ people are being discriminated against at every stage and in every area of life, and discrimination is actually increasing in the European Union.

The LGBTIQ strategy sets out a clear work programme for better protecting LGBTIQ people’s rights. First of all, it is extremely important that both discrimination against and harassment of LGBTIQ people be banned in all Member States, including in the workplace. Secondly, that the European Commission proposes legislation to ensure that parents can move freely across Member States without losing their parental status, including Rainbow Families. In many cases, when a border between EU Member States is crossed, the couple ceases to be legally a couple, becoming instead two unrelated individuals, and their children go from having two legal parents to only one legal parent or no legal parents. It is also important that the European Union should use its influence to ban the so-called “conversion therapies”, which are extremely harmful. Also, we need to fund training of professionals like doctors and teachers, who work with LGBTIQ people, to increase their knowledge about the circumstances and needs of this group and to encourage supportive behaviour.

The strategy is very promising, and it is now up to the Member States to start implementing it sooner rather than later.

Europe’s sustainable mobility policy must be based on a wide range of public policy measures in order to ensure a cost-effective transition to the least environmentally damaging and most energy-efficient modes of transport. Striking a balance between different modes of transport would reduce the adverse effects currently produced by transport systems (traffic jams, air pollution, noise, accidents and climate change). The policies in place up to now have not produced satisfactory results.

In the ten objectives set out in the White Paper on Transport, no clear reference is made to public transport in urban areas and the importance of planning and promoting non-motorised transport. More support for the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs) is needed to help cities integrate different types of mobility in a sustainable way and reduce air and noise pollution, traffic jams and accidents, while also taking into account the subsidiarity principle. It is also important to consider sustainable connectivity within rural areas as well as urban-rural links.

With regard to transport policy in the rail sector, the focus has mainly been on liberalisation. The Committee would also like to see greater emphasis placed on achieving the environmental objectives of the White Paper as well as on social issues.

Attention should be paid to the quality of work across all modes of transport, in particular as regards training, certification, working conditions and career development, and the creation of quality jobs (including more jobs for women in the transport sector).

Significant progress has been made in terms of road safety, but further action is needed to achieve the long-term goal of zero road casualties.

Research, innovation and digitalisation are crucial when it comes to improving the efficiency and productivity of the transport sector, and combining technological advances with behavioural changes will put European Member States on the right track towards smart and sustainable mobility.

On 24 March, the Diversity Europe Group hosted a debate on Collaboration for the future we want: opportunities and challenges, with Brikena Xhomaqi, co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group and Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform. The debate formed part of the Group meeting held before the EESC plenary session.

Ms Xhomaqi opened her statement by discussing the major challenges faced by member organisations of the EESC Liaison group and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) during this pandemic crisis – such as the right to assembly, which has been severely curtailed, and is, in some cases, non-existent. The digital gap has created major problems for small organisations and has made it harder for CSOs to engage in social dialogue.

Ms Xhomaqi wondered whether the recovery plan for Europe could ensure that CSOs are equal partners in the reconstruction of European societies.

Following the recent developments on the Conference on the Future of Europe, she stressed that CSOs called for the green and digital transitions to be on the table. She saw an opportunity for genuine and strengthened civil social dialogue at the European level to emerge from the pandemic.

Closing her statement, Ms Xhomaqi called for work to start on the Statute of the European Association, as this is fundamental to ensure transnational cooperation and to assist Europe in its recovery. Among many different issues, she highlighted the difficulties that CSOs face in getting funding. In most Member States, there is no specific funding to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 on CSOs’ activities, despite the crucial role these organisations have played in ensuring stability in their societies and in the fight against the pandemic.

Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland shared the concerns of the guest speaker. The role and work of CSOs needed to be acknowledged and supported. The president expressed his wish for a strong and long-term collaboration between the Diversity Europe and the Liaison Group to strengthen the voice of civil society and to ensure that civil society could play its role in the recovery and reconstruction after COVID-19.

Bernardo Hernández Bataller asked the guest speaker how ties between the Liaison Group and the EESC could be strengthened. Ms Xhomaqi reiterated the wish for closer cooperation and proposed discussing ways to improve communication and collaboration between the Groups and their member organisations at the next meeting of the Liaison Group in May.

1. EESC Liaison Group, https://europa.eu/!xk44tN
On 26 March, the Social Economy Category held its first meeting in 2021. The meeting was dedicated to a thematic debate on the topic Three Action Plans at the heart of a more social Europe: economy, rights, capital and investments.

The first panel concentrated on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), with speakers including Mr Bruno Ribeiro Barata, Counsellor for Social Affairs at the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the EU, Ms Santina Bertulessi, Deputy Head and Political Advisor in the Cabinet of Commissioner Schmit, as well as Mr Bernd Schlüter, Member of the Diversity Europe Group and rapporteur of the EESC opinion ‘The EPSR: evaluation of the initial implementation and recommendations for the future’, adopted in 2019 (SOC/6142).

The second panel examined the topic of a single market for capital and social impact investments, as instruments to support social rights. Speakers included Mr Stefano Palmieri, Member of the Workers’ Group and President of the ECO Section of the EESC, and Ms Giovanna Melandri, President of Social Impact Agenda (SIA) for Italy and President of the Human Foundation. Ms Melandri is also former Italian Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities. The third speaker on this panel was Mr Pierre Bollon, Member of the Employers’ Group and rapporteur of the EESC opinion ‘A Capital Markets Union for People and Businesses – a new action plan’, adopted in 2021 (ECO/533).

The meeting on 26 March also provided the opportunity for the newly elected spokesperson of the Social Economy Category, Mr Giuseppe Guerini, to present the draft work programme for the Category in 2021. The next meeting is scheduled to take place on 9 July.

Farmers’ Category holds its first meeting of the new term

On 29 March, the EESC’s Farmers’ Category held its first meeting of the new term of office (2020-2025). After a round-table presentation of all the candidates for the office of spokesperson, Members elected Arnold Puech D’Alissac (Employers’ Group) as new spokesperson of the Farmers’ Category for the first half of the term (2020-2023). Mr Puech D’Alissac represents the French National Federation of Farmers’ Unions (FNSEA) in the Committee.

After the election, Members of the Category had an exchange of views on the future work programme of the Category, highlighting the importance of transparency, reciprocity and sustainability in international trade negotiations, as well as the need to guarantee fair prices for producers and transparency in production costs. Joe Healy remarked that most growth in the sector over the next decade would take place outside the EU; international trade must not be at the expense of EU agriculture. José Manuel Roche Ramo pointed out that one of the major problems facing the industry at the moment was generational replacement in an industry with an ageing workforce.

1. European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights, [link]
2. EESC, opinion SOC/614, [link]
3. EESC, opinion ECO/533, [link]
workforce. To bring young men and women into the agricultural sector, it was necessary to ensure fair prices for producers. Jarmila Dubravská said that farmers could not survive with such low market prices and aggressive competition from the food supply chain.

The debate was followed by an exchange of views about Information Report NAT/806 (in preparation) on the evaluation of the Common Agricultural Policy’s impact on territorial development in rural areas. The rapporteur for the report, Piroska Kállay, explained the importance of funding programmes in combating youth unemployment in rural areas and in improving quality of life and guaranteeing public services in these areas. She highlighted the need to improve coordination between policies at local, national and European level.

Consumers and Environment Category addresses consumption in Europe after COVID-19

On 30 March, the Members of the Consumers and Environment Category met for the first time this year; amongst other things it held a debate on the consumption outlook in Europe after the COVID crisis. The debate with various stakeholders aimed at assessing the overall situation, which sectors had been most affected and the impact of teleworking on consumer practices, as well as exchanging views on the New Consumer Agenda and ways to achieve more responsible consumption.

Spokesperson Thierry Libaert pointed out that due to the pandemic a change had been observed in consumer behaviour and the kinds of services and products considered essential. In this regard, the Secretary-General of E-commerce Europe, Luca Cassetti, believed that there was no conflict between the e-commerce sector and traditional off-line businesses, as both needed to work together towards a green and digital transition.

Sandro Gozi, MEP from Renew Europe, stressed that it was fundamental to promote the circular economy, as more and more consumers surveyed were taking their ecological impact into consideration in their purchase decisions. Finally, Sylvia Maurer from the European Consumer Organisation BEUC explained that consumers were, in general, increasingly interested in repairing items, using second-hand products and donating more.

Dorothée Despagne Gatti, Director of CREPAQ, was the last guest speaker to take the floor. She shared her organisation’s concerns about food waste in Europe and said that it was necessary to educate society about packaging and waste reduction in everyday life.

Members of the Diversity Europe Group reiterated their call for a transition to a circular economy and for using every opportunity to prevent food waste. The next meeting of the Category would be on 13 July.

1. EESC, information report NAT/806, https://europa.eu/!Qk66RR
On 9 April, the EESC’s Liberal Professions Category held its first meeting of the new term of office (2020-2025). After a round table presentation of the candidates for spokesperson, the Members re-elected Marina Calderone and Rudolf Kolbe as Category spokespersons for the first half of the term (2020-2023). Both spokespersons have been Members of the EESC and its Diversity Europe Group since 2015. Ms Calderone is president of the National Order of Labour Relations Advisers and the United Committee of the Professions in Italy. Mr Kolbe is president of the Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions and the Federal Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineers.

After the election, the Members held an initial exchange of views on the Category’s future work programme that will be established with due regard for the comments made during the debate. They highlighted the important role played by professional associations in ensuring a high quality service and guaranteeing public confidence in the liberal professions, such as healthcare and legal, financial, engineering and social services. The Members also underlined the fundamental work carried out by the sector in supporting communities and their citizens during the pandemic, from doctors and nurses to IT technicians and mental health workers.

The last part of the meeting focused on the INT/904 own-initiative opinion on the liberal professions 4.0 drawn up by rapporteur Rudolf Kolbe. The opinion, that follows up on the theme of the 2019 Day of the Liberal Professions, Trust in Liberal Professions in the Age of Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence, will highlight the changes, challenges and opportunities for the liberal professions as a result of digitalisation and the introduction of artificial intelligence applications, as well as the enormous contribution made by all the liberal professions to the resilience of the European Union. The EESC plenary assembly might vote on the opinion during the April plenary session.
Policy-makers have to address the needs of Social Economy enterprises

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)
Spokesperson, Social Economy
Category, EESC
President, Cecap-Cicopa Europe,
European confederation of industrial
and service cooperatives
Board Member, Confcooperative,
Confederation of Italian Cooperatives
President, Confcooperative Bergamo

On 29 March, Giuseppe Guerini, rapporteur for the EESC’s opinion INT/925¹ and Diversity Europe Group Member, delivered a keynote speech at a high-level conference on “The role of Social Economy in the creation of jobs and in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights” organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The first half of the event saw contributions from the mayor of Sintra, which is part of the European Capital of Social Economy network, Ana Mendes Godinho, Portuguese Minister for Labour, Solidarity and Social Protection and Social Security, and EU Commissioner Nicolas Schmit.

Nicolas Schmit, EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, focused in his comments on the forthcoming Action Plan for the Social Economy, which will increase visibility, build enabling ecosystems, improve access to finance, and support the scale-up of the social economy.

The second half of the event was a panel debate, for which Giuseppe Guerini gave the keynote speech. The high-level panel consisted of several representatives of international organisations, national governments, and social economy networks.

During his speech, Mr Guerini highlighted that the social economy aimed to create value for its communities, rather than creating money from money, and that social economy enterprises were therefore important for creating local jobs and providing tailored services in their communities.

Mr Guerini, who is currently also the spokesperson for the EESC’s Social Economy Category, called on policy-makers to address the needs articulated by social economy enterprises: by providing funding and easing access to public procurement, local and regional governments can support social economy enterprises while ensuring local investment.

Mr Guerini went on to highlight the importance of the social economy in harnessing the gains of the digital economy, by introducing new technologies, providing training, and developing new innovative business models.

According to Mr Guerini it is necessary to adopt European policy programmes in at least the following four areas, to give consistency and stability to a social economy that is actively involved in constructing a more social, resilient and inclusive Europe:

- A taxation regime that recognises the general interest function performed by social economy companies, with particular regard to those operating in sectors of primary public interest such as social, health, educational and social inclusion services;
- Policies to promote public and private investments that favour the development of finance with a social impact – with a further improvement in the accessibility of the public procurement and concessions market;
- Policies to support stable employment and the economic leadership of workers in social economy companies, especially in the democratic governance of such companies;
- Support policies to implement new skills and promote the dissemination of innovation and new technologies in civil society.

The conference and Mr Gueriní’s complete keynote speech (04:21:10 min.) are available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_8IThq6RBI

¹ EESC, INT/925 opinion on The role of social economy in the creation of jobs and in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, https://europa.eu/!Xm44fP
Strengthening relations between the EESC and the Committee of the Regions

Thierry LIBAERT (FR)
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Representative, Nicolas Hulot Foundation for Nature and Mankind NGO
Research Associate, Catholic University of Leuven

On 29 March, the French delegation to the European Economic and Social Committee held a videoconference with their counterparts at the Committee of the Regions (CoR).

“One positive to come out of the pandemic is the development of options for remote meetings, which in this case could be seen as an advantage”, said Thierry Libaert, a Member of the Diversity Europe Group, who took part in the meeting. “The plenary sessions of our committees do not take place at the same time, which severely limits our opportunities to meet in person.”

The discussions between the delegations revealed that the two committees operated in the same way, had a very similar organisation and, above all, did essentially the same type of work, i.e. responding to requests for opinions on very similar timescales.

Mr Libaert said: “In practice, this means that it is very much in our interest to connect with our colleagues in the Committee of the Regions, as we can benefit from their reflections on the opinions we are producing. This, I think, will enable us to learn more from local and regional politicians, but also to discuss opportunities for public hearings, sharing documents, etc. – all of which can only improve the quality of our work.”

The meeting also allowed French Members of both committees to compare their views on subjects impacting both institutions, including the Conference on the Future of Europe, and, more specifically to the two delegations, the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2022. “We have decided to hold joint meetings on previously identified topics”, said Mr Libaert. “For example, on 21 April we will all be meeting with MEP Pascal Durand on the subject of due diligence.”

According to Mr Libaert, this meeting will show that it is really in the interest of EESC Members to get to know the Members of the Committee of the Regions better and that, far from being competitors in the European consultative process, “they can strengthen our role of representing organised civil society, both at local level and at the European institutions.”
On 24 March, the European Commissioner Helena Dalli took part in the EESC’s plenary debate on the new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030).

The strategy, which Commissioner Dalli presented to the plenary, is aimed at ensuring the full participation of persons with disabilities in society and progressing the implementation of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) at both EU and national levels. The debate featured contributions from several Members of the Diversity Europe Group.

Ioannis Vardakastanis, who is president of the European Disability Forum, was pleased to see that many of the recommendations made by the EESC in its 2019 own-initiative opinion on Shaping the EU agenda for disability rights 2020-2030 had been taken on board. However, he also drew attention to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, exclusion, poverty, and discrimination, and urged that the new strategy should address these.

Pietro Vittorio Barbieri, the chair of the EESC’s thematic study group on disability rights, and Dominique Gillot both called for an improvement of the situation of persons with disabilities with regard to employment and training. Mr Barbieri highlighted the lack of data on the impact of the pandemic on the employment opportunities of people with disabilities. “We need to find a way to stop persons with disabilities being excluded from the labour market”, Mr Barbieri added. As Ms Gillot underlined, progressing universal accessibility guidelines to help employers make their places of work more accessible would be crucial in this regard.

Krzysztof Pater drew attention to the right to vote for persons with disabilities. “Millions of EU citizens have no real right to vote in elections, including European Parliament elections. It is very sad that this problem has not been noticed by the European Commission until now”, the Diversity Europe Group Member said.

Sif Holst focused on the need for a more intersectional approach when it comes to disability. This should not only be the case with the EU strategy on disability rights, but should also be taken into account when dealing with discrimination such as gender-based discrimination, and more generally, such as when working on the post-pandemic recovery and resilience plans.

The EESC is currently preparing an opinion on the EU strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities. It will be drafted by Ioannis Vardakastanis and most likely be voted on at the EESC’s plenary session in July.

The debate is available at: https://fb.watch/4SO3nSeNNz/

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2. EESC, opinion SOC/616, https://europa.eu/!jT44Br
3. EESC, thematic study group on disability rights, https://europa.eu/!Uk74mw
4. See the EESC opinion SOC/638 on “The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections”, https://europa.eu/!Mu93Mk
5. EESC, opinion SOC/680, https://europa.eu/!Xr47PX
The EESC reaffirms its commitment to the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans

At the Committee's March plenary session, EESC Members held a debate with Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, to discuss the state of play of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkan countries. The debate was linked to the presentation and vote on the EESC opinion REX/533 on Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, which was drawn up by the Diversity Europe Group Member Ionuţ Sibian.

Opening the plenary debate, EESC president Christa Schweng stressed, among other things, the great importance that the EESC attaches to the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans.

In his address, Olivér Várhelyi welcomed the EESC’s continued and strong commitment to the Western Balkans and presented the Commission’s Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. “The plan’s ambition is to boost not only the region’s economic development, resilience and competitiveness, but also its social cohesion,” the Commissioner said.

Following Mr Várhelyi’s speech, the EESC president invited first the rapporteurs for the opinion REX/533 and then other EESC Members to take the floor.

Co-rapporteur Ionuţ Sibian, who also chairs the EESC’s EU-Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, called for a better definition of the concept of ‘key stakeholders’. He said that the EESC was convinced that social partners and civil society organisations should be better recognised in the new enlargement methodology and be given a greater role in the enlargement process. In this context, Mr Sibian stated that “building the national capacity of civil society organisations in the Western Balkans and facilitating regional cooperation, as well as exchanging expertise, should remain among the top priorities of the European Union and for national funding.”

Ioannis Vardakastanis, vice-president of the Diversity Europe Group and president of the EESC’s Euromed Follow-up Committee, spoke about the partnership with Europe’s Southern neighbouring countries. He stated that “more than 25 years ago, the European Union and our Southern partners launched the Barcelona process to turn the Mediterranean region into an area of dialogue and cooperation, guaranteeing peace, stability and prosperity. Now it is time to act; let’s offer our neighbouring countries the prospects they deserve.”

Ágnes Cser addressed the issue of communication and stated “by means of social and public media, the EU needs to provide information in the countries’ own languages so that people can inform themselves independently and can find correct information, for instance on how organised civil society can help with policies.” Ms Cser also called for direct investment in the Western Balkans with EU funds.

EU’s confirmed commitment to the enlargement process, as this is investment in peace, stability, security and economic development of the entire continent.” Ms Pavić-Rogošić also urged the candidate countries to deliver on the reforms they had promised.

Following Mr Várhelyi’s speech, the EESC president invited first the rapporteurs for the opinion REX/533 and then other EESC Members to take the floor.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić referred in her statement to the geostrategic importance of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, saying “we welcome the EU’s confirmed commitment to the enlargement process, as this is investment in peace, stability, security and economic development of the entire continent.” Ms Pavić-Rogošić also urged the candidate countries to deliver on the reforms they had promised.

The complete debate is available at: https://fb.watch/4R9Khd13Mz/

1. EESC, opinion REX/533, https://europa.eu/!RV73og
2. European Commission, An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, https://europa.eu/!c76en
3. EESC, EU-Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, https://europa.eu/!N74Kf
4. EESC, EU-Euromed Follow-up Committee, https://europa.eu/!Qm96ud

Ágnes Cser ©EESC

Olivér Várhelyi ©EESC

Ionuţ Sibian ©EESC

Ágnes Cser ©EESC
An economy that works for all requires re-thinking growth and development models

On 25 March, in the course of its plenary session, the EESC hosted a debate on COVID-19 recovery and international trade with Valdis Dombrovskis, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for An Economy that Works for People.

The Executive Vice-President gave an update on the preparation of the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) under the Recovery and Resilience Facility\(^1\). He stressed the need for Member States to ensure that these plans were of a high quality and prepared in a timely manner, so that the money could start flowing to the real economy. As regards international trade, he presented the Commission’s new strategy\(^2\), which would focus on the principles of “openness, sustainability and assertiveness”.

2021 was the European Year of Rail, she spoke in favour of the development of transport infrastructure, especially of projects to develop a trans-European transport network. Mr Dombrovskis acknowledged the link between investments in rail and greening the transport system and said that such investments may be eligible for financing under the NRRPs.

Alain Coheur, who is president of the EESC’s INT section\(^3\), spoke about the COVID-19 recovery, which would need to bring about a paradigm shift, “a new social and ecological contract to meet the challenges of the 21st century”. In this regard, he highlighted the importance of moving away from the politics of austerity and investing for instance in infrastructure for healthcare services and called for the recognition and support of the social economy.

Vertti Kiukas, who is president of the EESC’s TEN section\(^4\), addressed Mr Dombrovskis in her role as president of the EESC’s TEN section\(^5\). Mentioning that for the future are even more vital, he stressed. The European Semester\(^6\) process, Mr Kiukas suggested, should be reconstructed to take on board these ideas of an economy of well-being.

Séamus Boland, the president of the Diversity Europe Group, was the first Member to take the floor. Referring to the Executive Vice-President’s mission statement, he said: “If we really want to make an economy that works for people, it is imperative that we re-think our growth and development models and firmly place the SDGs and poverty reduction at the heart of Europe’s future and recovery.” Civil society organisations, he added, must be placed at the centre of this process.

Baiba Miltoviča addressed Mr Dombrovskis in her role as president of the EESC’s TEN section\(^4\). Mentioning that

The complete debate is available at: https://fb.watch/4SO4JZIX0g/

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1 European Commission, Recovery and Resilience Facility, https://europa.eu/1hD4nr
2 European Commission, press release 18/02/2021, https://europa.eu/1kR69uQ
3 EESC, TEN section, https://europa.eu/1kn94kX
4 EESC, INT section, https://europa.eu/1fk46ky
5 European Commission, European Semester. https://europa.eu/1fj38Rk
OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK BY OUR MEMBERS

The last EESC plenary session took place from 24 and 25 March, in a fully remote format. The EESC plenary adopted 18 opinions, 6 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), rapporteur, INT/916 Customs Union Action Plan
Athanasios IOANNIDIS (EL), rapporteur, INT/917 Customs single window
Ionuţ SIBIAN (RO), co-rapporteur, REX/533 Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans
Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT), co-rapporteur, INT/920 Retail Payments Strategy
Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT), rapporteur, ECO/540 Tackling non-performing loans in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic
Lutz RIBBE (DE), rapporteur, TEN/724 State of the Energy Union Report 2020 and Assessment of National Energy and Climate Plans

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

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 9 and 10 June. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

1. EESC, opinion INT/916, https://europa.eu/hr94KM
2. EESC, opinion INT/917, https://europa.eu/hr98Kh
3. EESC, opinion REX/533, https://europa.eu/hr729q
4. EESC, opinion INT/920, https://europa.eu/hr77Kw
5. EESC, opinion ECO/540, https://europa.eu/hr0990X
6. EESC, opinion TEN/724, https://europa.eu/hr77B1
7. EESC, opinions, https://europa.eu/hr984qG
8. EESC, plenary sessions, https://europa.eu/hr984qG
Mr Mc Loughlin, the October plenary has adopted your opinion (SOC/647). What are the three main findings of this opinion?

While we very much welcome the continuing work on youth unemployment at EU and national level, we feel there is still a need to focus on quality when developing initiatives under the Youth Guarantee (YG). Too many young people feel they are stuck in a circle of training, internships and unemployment; only a real focus on the quality of what is on offer under the Guarantee can ensure that young people have faith in this approach and in the initiative more generally.

We also call for post-placement feedback and monitoring of the YG to be enforced, so that the monitoring and evaluation of support for effective youth policies can be further improved.

Similarly, in the opinion we express concern about early school leaving and the need for greater EU involvement in helping to prevent this. We call for effective support for public employment services (PES) to help people access further education and training and high-quality jobs. We note that the increase to the maximum age of YG beneficiaries should not lead to a decrease in the quality of opportunities provided by PES, nor should it put more pressure on PES or on the education and training systems, which are facing increased demand.

How could these issues be addressed? What are your three main recommendations or proposals?

We are calling on Member States to increase cooperation so that any major reforms to the YG are reflected in the legal instruments governing the relevant funding. In the opinion, the EESC invites the Commission to increase the amount of EU funding available for the YG, taking into account all EU investment in the YG and all existing EU programmes, as well as an evaluation of the use of EU funds. Information on available EU funds for the YG needs to be better communicated to organisations providing services for young people, and Member States need to receive guidelines in their own languages.

The EESC welcomes the fact that targeted support for young people will be included in the European Semester. It also welcomes the Commission’s plan to set up a Monitoring Framework on Access to Social Protection and provide solutions ensuring adequate working conditions for people employed via digital platforms, as otherwise crowd work and platform work will not provide the best long-term solutions in terms of good-quality job placements for young people within the YG.

How do you want to make civil society’s voice heard? What are your next steps?

We are seeking the involvement of social partners and other relevant stakeholders in the implementation of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), granted by the European Code of Conduct on Partnership under the European Structural and Investment Funds. Such involvement needs to be extended to the EU financial instrument supporting the enhanced Youth Guarantee in the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027). This would ensure participatory programming and effective monitoring of its implementation so that the funds really reach those in need. The EESC proposes linking the forthcoming European Child Guarantee to the YG to provide more efficient support to young people with children, whether they are employed or unemployed. The EESC encourages the Commission to set out an Action Plan for the Social Economy that would offer effective support to youth entrepreneurs and business start-ups and increase green skills at local level, with a special focus on vulnerable groups and with the involvement of the relevant social partners and civil society organisations.

Find out more about the EESC opinion SOC/647 at: https://europa.eu/!KP99ux
MEMBERS WORKING ON NEW EESC OPINIONS

Presidency of a study group
Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL), REX/540 Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new Agenda for the Mediterranean
Jarmila DUBRAVSKÁ (CZ), CCMI/179 Action Plan on synergies between civil, defence and space industries
John COMER (IE), REX/539 Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy
Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT), ECO/549 Sustainable finance taxonomy - climate change
Maurizio MENSI (IT), INT/940 Regulation on artificial intelligence

Rapporteurship
Anastasis YIAPANIS (CY), INT/936 Establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe
Kinga JOÓ (HU), SOC/682 EU strategy on the rights of the child/Child Guarantee
Neža REPANŠEK (SI), INT/941 Communication on the global approach to research, innovation, education and youth