Social Economy, The Future of Europe
On 9 May, Europe Day, the Conference on the Future of Europe concluded its work. At the closing ceremony, the Co-Chairs of the Conference Executive Board handed over the final report on the outcome of the Conference to the leaders of the EU. This report, which is a result of a process ongoing since May 2021, involved a Conference Plenary and randomly chosen citizens who met in panels and working groups. Topics ranged from European democracy to youth and education, Europe in the world, as well as issues related to economics, employment, digitalisation and rights.

While the process, torturous and difficult, proved to be slow and tedious at times, it has certainly proved that there is an imperative that the EU as a Union needs radical reform. Not just because of its age, but also because there are new realities now in place and the EU needs to be mindful of them.

President Macron was present at the closing ceremony at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and received the report on behalf of the Council Presidency. His speech urged all leaders to go much further. The President proposed that Europe should establish a new political union across the continent, which would include countries like the United Kingdom, Ukraine and others still outside the Union, which are willing to be part of the greater European family.

Speaking on the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration - the declaration that proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community, the first of a series of supranational European institutions that would ultimately become today’s European Union - President Macron’s speech was both a fitting and timely contribution to the potential of an evolving Europe. A Europe which is strong in the areas of equality, inclusion and social justice.

From a civil society perspective, such a discussion needs to be led by citizens. The latter may already be working towards a fairer Europe through the offices of organised groups or be merely individual citizens working in a voluntary or occupational capacity to deliver a better place for our children to grow up in.

President Macron may have caught the attendance in Strasbourg by surprise. However, the Europe we are now in, is being reshaped before our eyes, often without our participation or knowledge. Clearly, this violent war in Ukraine has and is sending civilization into a horrible retreat. Almost towards the dark ages, where power and disinformation go hand in hand and where people are merely pawns in the games of dictators and self-styled rulers, whose aims are to satisfy the elite.

Mr Macron is asking us to rethink our European geography and politics. Maybe we should do that, but in doing so, let’s be sure that we think through our values and ensure that they are shared by all who wish to join us.

Séamus Boland
**No Green Deal without a social deal**

ENSIE is the **European Network of Social Integration Enterprises** (ENSIE), which represents the interests of 30 national, regional and local networks of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) from 24 European countries.

WISEs are a subset of the **Social Economy**, working to integrate disadvantaged groups (NEETs, migrants, young people, etc.) by giving them jobs.

**WISEs in the green transition**

As explained during the plenary session debate on *The Green Deal is a Social Deal* at the **Social Economy Summit** in Strasbourg on 5 May, numerous WISEs are contributing to the green transition, ensuring that it is also a fair transition. Some are working in the circular economy, others in social agriculture or in building renovation. Reuse and recycling are sectors where WISEs are particularly active as they need a lot of low-skilled manpower.

**Supporting WISEs**

To support the development of WISEs active in the green transition, raising awareness on the importance of developing socially responsible public procurement by governments at all levels is key (through social clauses or reserved markets). WISEs have demonstrated that combining social and green transitions is possible, and it is crucial to ensure a just transition. Investing in WISEs means creating more opportunities for EU citizens and the environment.

**WISEs in the Ukrainian crisis**

WISEs have been very active in supporting Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the war. First with emergency support by collecting equipment sent to Ukraine or to the border, by providing food and accommodation, furniture and clothes and so forth to refugees. They are now preparing for the medium and long terms by offering jobs in WISEs for Ukrainian refugees so they can become part of the local labour market.

Governments must support WISEs’ work in this, adding Ukrainian refugees to the list of WISEs’ and social enterprises’ target groups, following the lead of France and Latvia.

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1. ENSIE, https://www.ensie.org/
2. European Commission, Social economy in the EU, https://europa.eu/!nt7wvf
5. ENSIE, WISEs are with Ukrainian people, https://www.ensie.org/wises-data/wises-are-with-ukrainian-people
Social economy: the right vehicle towards inclusion

Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES)
Spanish Business Federation for the Social Economy (CEPES)

Following the European Commission’s publication of the European Action Plan on the Social Economy in late December, it is only natural that 2022 should become the year where the social economy finally starts getting the attention it deserves. Indeed, it was about time, since social economy organisations (cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations, social enterprises, as well as other specific legal forms) now number more than 3 million enterprises across Europe and employ 14 million people in the EU.

Improving the right framework conditions for the social economy across Europe, including improved visibility and recognition and access to finance and markets, are some of the main aspects of the action plan. This recognition is very welcome, but the role of the social economy as one of the main facilitators of the creation of an inclusive and non-discriminatory Europe still remains underexplored.

The social economy sector has traditionally had a strong focus on addressing social challenges, such as helping disadvantaged groups integrate into the labour market or providing care and support to certain groups at risk of social exclusion, such as the elderly or people with disabilities. This role seems more relevant than ever, given the proven track record the social economy has for speeding up recovery in the face of difficult economic situations after major crises.

Contribution of the social economy to the Conference on the Future of Europe

Alain COHEUR (BE)
President, EESC
INT section
Director, European and International Affairs, National Union of Socialist Mutual Health Funds (UNMS)

The interinstitutional event The social economy, the future of Europe took place in three parts all in Strasbourg: on 17 February (the very first meeting of the EU Council of Ministers in charge of the social economy), 10 March (a debate in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)) and on 5 and 6 May 2022 (conferences, workshops, thematic areas for debate and participation).

The debate on 10 March was organised by the EESC at the European Parliament around the main themes of the CoFoE. Indeed, the CoFoE cannot overlook the model of economic governance embodied in the social economy (SSE). The European Commission is devoting an action plan to it in order to unleash its full potential and the European Parliament has already attributed many works to it, but today it is necessary to take a further step: the social economy must be promoted in the work of the CoFoE.

The EESC decided to gather social economy actors and MEPs in pairs during this debate so that institutional actors could relay the key messages of the actors of the social economy within the CoFoE.

The main recommendations given to the CoFoE were the following:
- to improve the access of social economy organisations to public procurement to fully develop the potential of the circular economy;
- to ensure that social economy becomes a major player in health, legal recognition of the mutualist model is essential at European level;
- to put in place an “SSE filter” for all foreign policy instruments and agreements and international partnerships of the EU so that social economy can be used as a strategy for international cooperation;
- to introduce environmental clauses, packages and eco-design of digital services in digital public procurement, because the social economy is a key player in Europe’s digital future.

3. French Presidency of the Council of the EU, Meeting 17/02/2022, https://europa.eu/!Vn4wB
5. EESC, debate on Social Economy, the future of Europe, https://europa.eu/!gpyvQ
One year has passed since the EU’s Social Summit in Porto — dedicated to the European Pillar of Social Rights — which was followed by the opening of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). As that conference wraps up, it “passes the baton” to the Social Economy Conference in Strasbourg.

This alignment of dates reminds us of the importance of the social dimension for the future of Europe.

The various entities that make up the social economy remind us every day, with their extensive presence on the ground across the EU, that without strong social cohesion, built on the ability to take care of people, freedoms and rights by directly involving citizens and local communities in addressing their own needs, a sustainable and prosperous future for local communities would be inconceivable. This caring emerges from interest in others and with others, determining the value of the social dimension of the European institutions.

The social dimension of the EU is nothing new; in fact it is recognised by Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). For too long, it has been neglected, squeezed out by austerity policies; it has finally reappeared on the cohesion policy agenda and we must ensure that it maintains its impact and central role in the debate on the future of Europe. With this in mind, the Action Plan for the Social Economy and the conference in Strasbourg must also be seized as an opportunity to make up for the lack of attention, in my view, given to the role of the social economy during the CoFoE.

The Social Economy Action Plan aims to put in place the right conditions to help the social economy succeed by taking action in the areas of taxation, public procurement and state aid rules, improving access to finance and economic support measures, and increasing awareness and the visibility of the social economy.

None of these objectives can realistically be achieved satisfactorily unless stronger legitimacy is accorded to the EU’s competences in the social and health fields, as well as in the taxation and economic fields, beyond competition policy and monetary policy for the euro area.

Interview with Ana Umbelino on the Social Economy

Ana UMBELINO
President, European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy (REVES)
Deputy Mayor, City of Torres Vedras

What role should the Social Economy play in Europe’s future?

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, only 3% of people lived at cities. That figure has now risen to 50% and may increase even further, to 70%, in the next 30 years. Hence, we cannot think about Europe’s future, nor the quality of human life in Europe, without discussing cities and their future.

According to Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of the city as an observatory and a stage, it is essential to listen to real people, to decode their needs and dreams and, in parallel, to create spaces that transform
cities into places of encounter where experiences are shared and co-constructed. Metaphorically speaking, walking towards Europe’s future is walking towards ordinary people’s needs and dreams.

The rediscovery of community and the common good transforms cities into a collective project made by and for ordinary people. Generating a “new commons for Europe” puts citizens’ wellbeing and societal progress at the heart of bottom-up and top-down processes. The common good is by definition the social good that society distributes to its members to foster their integral development.

In this changing and challenging context, municipalities and the social economy play an indisputable role in the revival of an ethics of co-responsibility and care for shared spaces and resources, enhancing Europe’s progressive vocation as a political project, and reinforcing its profile as a community of values anchored in a new citizenship.

What is needed to tap the full potential of the Social Economy? What are the current challenges?

One major challenge identified by REVES, is the absence of an appropriate framework for the co-design and implementation of structural public policies that bring together social economy entities and public authorities. From the public authorities’ side, that requires creating the conditions and building opportunities for local communities to benefit from the contribution of social economy organisations in the design and implementation of sustainable policy instruments.

Moreover, there needs to be a change in the legal/formal attitude towards the social economy. The social economy needs to be considered as an entity in itself with corresponding rules, regulations and procedures that would allow social economy actions to be carried out effectively and its relationship with public authorities to develop. According to REVES, this should be the goal of the Social Economy Action Plan, yet some European countries have started to pave the way for this.

Another challenge refers to the specific focus on the social economy as an organisational model for community-driven transitions (green, digital and social): these specific sectors, and the transition in general, should not be left to the traditional market-based system response that will necessarily fail in this endeavour as long as it continues to follow a competitive approach that prioritises the maximisation of profit. The ongoing transitions towards safeguarding the planet and the biodiversity it encompasses, have to be based on a cooperative approach that must not to be confused with cooperative enterprising. It is a guiding behaviour in the relationships between persons and players. There are some hints of this approach in some EU regulations (the energy one, for instance), but it has to be more systematic and assertive.

2. European Commission, Social economy in the EU, https://europa.eu/!nt7wvf
What can we expect from Social Taxonomy?

Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT)
Representative, Lithuanian Consumers Alliance

Work on the own-initiative EESC opinion ECO/581 Social Taxonomy - Challenges and Opportunities has started this April.

Led by the experienced rapporteur, Ms Judith Vorbach (Austria, EESC Workers’ Group), the study group that is preparing the opinion engaged in an inspiring discussion about what the ideal classification system for “socially-sustainable investment” should look like.

There are many financial institutions that already champion social responsibility because it is “the right thing to do”. This is different from just “avoiding harm” – social taxonomy should aim to clarify this distinction and become a tool to incentivise the former.

The social taxonomy structure discussed by the study group borrows many elements from environmental taxonomy, which, while still in development, has already attracted a lot of attention from stakeholders. There are, supposedly, three stakeholder groups – workers, consumers, and communities. Three easily understandable social objectives come with several sub-objectives:

- decent work;
- adequate living standards and end-user well-being;
- inclusive, sustainable communities and societies.

The challenges with social taxonomy are the same as with environmental taxonomy: lack of scientific data or the outright impossibility to measure the impact; the divergence of visions about what the taxonomy should be used for; and the level of ambition. While arguments can turn emotional, for the EU to maintain its social approach and appeal, developing a social taxonomy dossier will mark an essential milestone on the global scene of socially-compliant investments.

There is an appetite for these types of investment. In December 2021, Reuters reported the value of social bonds issued globally, at USD 191.8 billion, a massive (twentyfold!) jump compared to the amount recorded in the pre-pandemic years of 2017-2019.

Want to learn more about this exciting topic? Read the latest (February 2022) publication issued by the Platform on Sustainable Finance, Final Report on Social Taxonomy, available here: https://europa.eu/!BVTP6y

Social economy and future of Europe

Juraj SIPKO (SK)
Director, Institute of Economic Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences

The countries of the European Union are currently undergoing the greatest historical transformation since its inception. This process covers all areas of socioeconomic life. A new phenomenon of the transition process is the focus on the social economy, which follows social priorities instead of the current economic model geared to maximising profit.

Today, more than 13 million people are employed in the social economy, representing around 6.3% of the total workforce in the EU. In some countries, the number of people working in this sector has increased significantly as a result of the global financial crisis.

In Belgium, for example, the number of employees in the social economy has reached 20.1%, whereas in France employment of as much as 25% has been recorded.

The social economy sector has contributed significantly to resilience to adverse external shocks, like the global financial crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. It offers employment opportunities in areas that are very important for the overarching social structure and which are less dominated by the private sector, e.g. social services, health and other social areas that support the most vulnerable. Moreover, due to its specific nature, the social economy offers the opportunity to cushion and overcome the problems that have arisen as a result of adverse external shocks.

The legacy of the global financial crisis, but above all the negative impact of COVID-19 and the current energy and potential food crisis, have had a negative impact on the most vulnerable. Current as well as post-COVID trends are characterised by increasing inequality and a shortage of decent jobs. In some sectors, there is also a negative impact on the labour market stemming from climate change, technological progress and adverse demographic trends. In this context, measures to combat rising poverty within the EU will need to be adopted and implemented.

Today, the Member States also face a number of challenges linked to

1. EESC opinion ECO/581, https://europa.eu/!vXXcrKY
the historic **shift towards efficient and sustainable production** of goods and services. In this context, **social innovation** will have an important role. This can lead to a change in the relationships between those delivering economic policy and the overall management of socio-economic processes. It will therefore be important to focus on a resilient, sustainable and socially innovative economic model while accepting technological change and using the social economy within the ecosystem.

This can create **favourable conditions for the transition** to a green, digital and socially just economy, thus creating resilience to real external shocks.

### The social economy is a beacon of hope for Europe

*Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)*

Vice-President, Diversity Europe Group
President, Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP)
President, European Disability Forum
President, International Disability Alliance
Member, Economic and Social Council of Greece (OKE)
Member, Greek National Commission of Human Rights (EEDA)

We are living in a time where we are increasingly aware of the **importance of quality employment and corporate responsibility**. In the same vein, we are starting to understand the damage that poor working environments can cause workers and their communities.

With **business models** that focus **exclusively on profit**, we are seeing a number of issues that are worsening: poor mental health caused by long working hours, anxiety linked to precarious working contracts, and greater in-work poverty due to record inflation combined with stagnating salaries.

Profit-driven business models, in the worst cases, can also impoverish our communities. This is particularly true when profits are directed towards shareholders rather than to the workers responsible for generating that wealth. **These models foster fragile and divided societies**.

More fundamentally, businesses driven exclusively by profit divert our human potential away from addressing the pressing challenges we face. As a result, now more than ever before, the **social economy** is a beacon of hope for Europe. With our population ageing, and the proportion of active people consequently falling, we need to ensure that our ability to be “productive” is channelled into addressing social issues and showing **solidarity** with one another, rather than into the pursuit of profit.

The **social economy** is a vessel to achieve just this. It offers an approach to the world of work that **puts people first**, as employees, clients and recipients of services. This model also offers opportunities to bring those typically excluded from the labour market into the workforce, with the support they need to thrive. The social economy can thus simultaneously **improve the wellbeing of workers**, offer **employment opportunities** to a greater number of people, and then use their knowledge, energy and talents to **address society’s most pressing issues**.

### The urgent situation in Europe and the social economy

*Edgar VILARES DIOGO (PT)*

Administrative Expert, Union of Portuguese Mutual Societies (UMP)

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated how crucial the **role of social economy** organisations is. They have brought together many willing hands and kind hearts to support, rescue, host and integrate millions of people fleeing war.

As at other difficult times, mutual societies and other social economy organisations in Portugal have been at the forefront of the response to this urgent social situation. Thanks to their action, many thousands of Ukrainian women and children have been given a place to live, food aid, essential goods and healthcare. Children have been found schools; social organisations and businesses are creating employment opportunities for women.

This well of humanitarian support, resilience and solidarity, promoting cohesion and creating social value, must not be wasted by a Europe that is proclaiming the green, digital and social transitions to be its aims for the decade.

I firmly believe that the **social economy can play an important role** not only in reducing inequalities, but also in welcoming and integrating...
refugees and migrants, in supporting young people, and in ensuring the sustainability of health and social security systems.

The Action Plan on the Social Economy indicates there are grounds for hope.

It is urgent that Europe and its Member States at last devise a legal framework that guarantees a specific status for these bodies and safeguards their organisational diversity and their enterprise-based models in the context of Europe.

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

Conference on the Future of Europe – it’s now time for action!

On 9 May, the first phase of the Conference on the Future of Europe ended with the report on the outcomes being handed over to President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, French President Emmanuel Macron, representing the Council Presidency, and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.

The report is based on the multitude of discussions, debates and events organised across the EU Member States during the conference. The EESC has actively participated by hosting events, providing input and participating in the working groups and the plenary of the conference. Our key message is the importance of giving the public a real say and putting civil society back at the heart of the European political agenda.

The conference report, with 9 topics, 49 proposals and over 320 concrete measures, is based on recommendations from the European and national citizens’ panels, the multilingual digital platform and the discussions in the working groups of the conference.

However, in my view, the report is only the first phase. The second phase is even more important as it is now time to turn words into action.

The expectations for this next step are high from citizens and stakeholders across Europe who have given their time, provided ideas and actively engaged in this process. We expect all proposed measures to be followed up transparently with clear feedback from the EU institutions. This also entails responsibilities for the upcoming Czech and Swedish EU presidencies. For now, the EU institutions will examine how to follow up effectively with a feedback event in autumn 2022.

I participated in the Working Group on European Democracy. The work was challenging at times, but the final proposals clearly emphasise that boosting civil society will strengthen democratic life in Europe. The report proposed involving the EESC in the citizen participation process, enhancing its institutional role and empowering it as a facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities. I look forward to us, the EESC, realizing these proposals but also closely monitoring the next steps and continuing to engage in the process ahead.

Civil society organisations at the helm of volunteer assistance to Ukrainian civilians

Civil society organisations need continued support for their assistance to Ukrainian people and refugees. This is of particular importance for organisations working in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries. National and EU authorities need a long-term strategy for refugees and volunteers.

Representatives of civil society organisations from five neighbouring countries spoke about their work at a recent meeting of the Diversity Europe Group. Their statements illustrated the crucial role that civil society organisations play in assisting people in this crisis. Many organisations adapted their activities overnight and are now closely cooperating with local and national authorities, international and partner organisations in Ukraine, and citizens. They provide missing services and complement the work of the public authorities.

Civil society organisations are active in every single country, said Séamus Boland, president of the Diversity Europe Group, opening the debate. People are driving to Kyiv, are risking their lives bringing people from the most dangerous areas of Ukraine, bringing supplies, bringing relief.

But civil society organisations do not only provide relief items to Ukrainian people. They also offer transport and accommodation or provide people with relevant information.

People usually come bare-handed, explained Paulina Gajownik from the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association. Railway stations are their first destination and this is where we come in. We manage thousands of volunteers, directing the refugees to overnight stay facilities, but also to private lodgings. We make sure that everyone is fed and that no one goes hungry anymore.

Mihaela Munteanu of the Federation for Social Services (FONSS-NGOs) and the Social Emergencies Centre in Iași explained that six federations, comprising more than 300 NGOs from across Romania, coordinate their action at the emergencies centre to provide targeted aid. They are supported by ordinary citizens and entrepreneurs and their work goes beyond providing emergency assistance: We want to be able to offer refugees an opportunity to become integrated into society. Against that backdrop we need help, because Romanian social services don’t receive much public funding.

The Republic of Moldova has received the most refugees in relation to its population. We are working day and night, said Doina Cernavca from «Casa Buna» Chișinău in Moldova. We started to collect donations immediately and also sent transporter convoys to Ukraine. In just three days, we distributed 45 tonnes of relief items. We want to give people a little bit of peace so that they can get through this suffering that is inflicted on them.

Patrik Karsa from the organisation Hungarian Reformed Church Aid stressed the role of volunteers: 90% of those who are working with us are volunteers. Mr Karsa also spoke about the need to address refugees’ psychological needs and provide aid in the longer term, for instance in terms of labour market integration.

Zuzana Suchová of «Who Helps Ukraine», a network of almost 40 Slovak NGOs, explained that the network finances its activities with the help of fundraising platforms. We are going to need about 800 volunteers a month to do our work. At this point, many professionals and volunteers are reaching the point of exhaustion, she warned.

During the meeting of the Diversity Europe Group, participants also had the chance to listen to a testimony from Ukraine, which spoke about the humanitarian situation on the ground. Representatives from the European Commission (EC) presented the Commission’s overall strategy.

1. The Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHPP), https://zhp.pl/en
Aid Operations

Civil Protection and Humanitarian Directorate-General for European from the enlargement.

to become candidate countries for EU enlargement.

of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova on a first assessment of the applications Commission had also started to work the education system, he said. The integration into the job market and coming to the EU27 and also their professional qualifications of Ukrainians are now looking into the recognition of the Ukrainian government. Colleagues about the financial support that the of the European Commission spoke

Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

General for European Neighbourhood

Martin Muehleck from the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission spoke about the financial support that the Commission had swiftly provided to the Ukrainian government. Colleagues are now looking into the recognition of professional qualifications of Ukrainians coming to the EU27 and also their integration into the job market and the education system, he said. The Commission had also started to work on a first assessment of the applications of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova to become candidate countries for EU enlargement.

Cristina Martinez from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations of the European Commission explained that the EC is providing both humanitarian aid and support under the civil protection mechanism. It is also essential for the EU as a whole to keep advocating for humanitarian access and humanitarian corridors to ensure safe passage and deliver relief items to all people in need and to evacuate civilians from cities under siege. We also encourage donors to swiftly pass from pledges to action. It is clear that massive support will be needed in the coming month, as the country is severely affected by the hostilities and millions of people have lost their means of subsistence, Ms Martinez stressed.

The presentations were followed by a lively debate, in which Diversity Europe vice-president Ioannis Vardakastanis presented the work of the European Disability Forum and the International Disability Alliance. We have a crisis within the crisis, Mr Vardakastanis urged. People with disabilities find it very hard to move to shelters, to flee the war by moving inside Ukraine or towards a third country. Both the European Commission and the United Nations need to give more priority to those people.

Other Members of the Diversity Europe Group called for:

• an independent human rights violations monitoring process to be launched involving the EESC;
• the EU enlargement process to be revised;
• Members and their organisations to take action and to coordinate this action;
• energy supplies from Russia and trade with Russia to be halted;
• support from national and EU authorities to be stepped up;
• a long-term strategy to be provided that covers education, accommodation, psycho-social help, retirement, employment, people with disabilities, etc.;
• the business with migration and the misuse of funding to be tackled.

At the March plenary session, the EESC adopted a resolution entitled “War in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact”, with Diversity Europe Group president Séamus Boland serving as one of the rapporteurs. The vote on the resolution was preceded by a plenary debate with guest speakers including Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, founder of the Open Russia movement, Anatoliy Kinakh, president of the National Tripartite Social and Economic Council of Ukraine, and Yevgenya Pavlova from the National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine.

Watch the recording of the plenary debate on the EESC Resolution at: https://fb.watch/chF3wllwag/

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space

An interview on the new EESC study with the lead author Filip Pazderski

To which political and societal context does this study respond?

Although fundamental rights are robustly safeguarded in the EU Member States, they faced increasing pressure across the region even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenges include burdensome legislation, restrictions and constraints on financial resources for civil society organisations (CSOs), barriers hindering influence over policy-making and access to public information, limitations on freedom to protest, and a general pressure and decline in access to rights for all. Records of negative statements against civil organisations and social movements performing a deliberative or advocacy function have also emerged. These phenomena have been referred to as “shrinking civic space”. It is part of a wider deterioration of the rule of law and democratic backsliding. Some developments in these areas have been seen in most EU countries. In our study we wanted to look at how the pandemic influenced these trends further.

5. EESC resolution on “War in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact”, https://europa.eu/!RxDtYb
6. EESC study, https://europa.eu/!mwdjNf
How did you prepare the study?

We used mixed, quantitative and qualitative methods. After analysing existing reports on the subject, we carried out an online survey in 11 languages amongst CSOs across the EU. To delve deeper into the variety of challenges and their manifestations in individual Member States, 29 in-depth expert interviews in six EU countries (France, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Spain, Slovenia) were conducted. This also helped us to learn about public policies already proposed at national level for CSOs. Lastly, three group discussions with experts from different EU countries enabled us to develop policy proposals that organisations still need.

What are the study’s main findings and recommendations?

Above all, the pandemic has had a heterogeneous and complex impact on CSOs. On the one hand, many CSOs were the first to reorganise their activities to respond faster than public administration or business to local communities’ needs. Moving their operations online accelerated digitalisation. All this has allowed CSOs to reach out to new audiences and increase the efficiency and scope of activities. Building coalitions, fostering the exchange of experiences and establishing common public positions was made easier. As a result, the social visibility of CSOs has increased and there is now a better understanding of their day-to-day role.

On the other hand, CSOs have been strongly affected by the enduring health crisis. Financial difficulties had the most acute effect. In particular smaller entities operating outside big cities and gathering more digitally excluded groups, were forced to suspend their work. Many of them have not resumed operations to date. Activists were faced with mental health challenges, fatigue from working remotely and growing uncertainty about the future, exacerbated by long-term social isolation. Work-life balance was often difficult to maintain due to work at irregular hours.

The pandemic has highlighted or reinforced already existing problems. The ability of CSOs to operate has been hindered by extraordinary legislation, as this legislation has reduced the transparency of governments, impeded oversight of their work, and restricted freedom of assembly and expression. These restrictions and curtailments happened under the pretext of countering the pandemic. Civil dialogue standards in law-making have dropped. CSOs have often not even been included in consulting laws addressing the impact of the crisis.

To respond to these challenges, we need to provide CSOs with more flexible and accessible funding, ensure their meaningful participation in the monitoring of EU funds, adopt the EU Civil Society Strategy emphasising the sector’s role, constantly monitor and respond to attacks on civic actors and provide a more structured framework for an open, regular and transparent EU civil dialogue. These are not new ideas, but the pandemic has given them fresh meaning. Moreover, the role CSOs have played and the visibility they have gained may help finally put these ideas into practice!

The study was presented at the Civil Society Days in March. More information is available at https://europa.eu/!Gnd7Jp

The Social Economy Action Plan: moving from ambitions to implementation

On 16 March the Social Economy Category of the EESC held its first meeting of the year. The discussions focussed on the European Commission’s Social Economy Action Plan, which was adopted on 9 December 2021. The two panels concentrated respectively on the opportunities and challenges of the action plan, as well as on the potential for collaboration between social economy organisations and public administrations, during the implementation phase.

The Members of the Category were honoured by the active participation of Ms Grégoire, French Deputy Minister responsible for the Social, Solidarity and Responsible Economy, who spoke alongside Mr Bobba, former Secretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Labour and Welfare and currently President of the Terzjus Observatory for Third Sector legislation.

The next meeting of the Social Economy Category will take place on: 5 July 2022

2. EESC Social Economy Category, https://europa.eu/ht42UK
The European Consumer Agenda with the European Parliament.

The situation in Ukraine and current challenges and future scenarios for European professionals

On 19 April, the Liberal Professions Category held its first meeting of the year. Category Members participated in a thematic debate on Ukraine and discussed crucial topics relevant to their work before the annual Category event “European Day of the Liberal Professions 2022”.

Co-spokesperson Rudolf Kolbe chaired the debate entitled “The Liberal Professions in Ukraine and their role in the EU for the reception and job placement of refugees,” in which Category Members and guests spoke about the current situation in Ukraine. Andriy Halaida, director of the Department of National Infrastructure Development of Geospatial Data of the State Service for Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre, was remotely connected from Ukraine and contributed with a presentation on “The state of activity of the topographic and geodetic sphere until 24.02.2022 and during the war.” The president of the Italian National Council of Social Workers Gianmario Gazzi contributed to the debate by presenting Italy’s response to the current challenges posed by the aggression against Ukraine, as well as its future perspectives and potential developments. “Professionals are already thinking about the medium and long term,” Mr Gazzi stated, referring to the integration of Ukrainian refugees in the labour market.

The concluding part of the meeting focused on the preparation of the European Day of the Liberal Professions, which took place on 10 May. Category Members took the floor and discussed the key topics of the upcoming event and the participating speakers. The press release on the event as well as presentations of guest speakers and photos are available on the EESC website.

MEMBERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Sustainable consumption for a stronger economy

On 28 March, our Spanish Member, Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia, took part in a thought-provoking debate to promote the Conference on the Future of Europe, focussing in particular on how to build a stronger economy. The debate took place in Barcelona and was organised by the Abat Oliba CEU University and the 20minutos newspaper in cooperation with the European Parliament.

The European Consumer Agenda puts consumers at the centre of the single market and points to them as the EU’s key growth driver. Consumer spending accounts for 56% of the EU’s GDP. “Consumers are an essential driving force in steering the development of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth that can strengthen our economy. What is more, today, 93% of Europeans see climate change as a serious problem. Therefore, achieving a green and just transition has become a must. Consumers must be at the centre of the debates on sustainability,” said Ileana Izverniceanu.

During the debate there was also a discussion on how important it is for consumers to be aware of the impact they have in different areas such as water and energy consumption, mobility, shopping and waste. However, the transition towards a stronger, more sustainable economy cannot be based solely on consumers’ individual commitments. According to Ms Izverniceanu, strategies need to be devised in the EU to motivate sustainable citizens. Ms Izverniceanu remarked that consumers prefer incentives over punishments. Therefore, policies that reward committed citizens with tax credits and other incentives should be implemented rather than increasing taxes and penalties. The price of sustainable products is a major barrier, so thought needs to be given to how to integrate social and environmental externalities. Lastly, Ms Izverniceanu drew attention to a key aspect: awareness and education programmes encouraging a more sustainable consumption need to be developed. This is the fastest route to a stronger economy.

European Parliament representatives and representatives from the academic world were also present at the debate.

The full debate is available here: https://youtu.be/0a9zEyiNfFc

1. EESC Liberal Professions Category, https://europa.eu/!MJ76wG
2. EESC, European Day of the Liberal Professions 2022, https://europa.eu/!C8bCnV
3. EESC, European Day of the Liberal Professions 2022, https://europa.eu/!C8bCnV
4. 20 minutos, Europa, ante el desafío de avanzar hacia una mayor integración económica, https://cutt.ly/FHaB6Bt
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST PLENARY SESSION

Commissioner Gabriel participates in EESC plenary debate

In March, the EESC held a plenary debate on the Commission’s proposal on the New European Bauhaus initiative with Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

The debate emphasised the crucial goal of the New European Bauhaus initiative: longterm investment in sustainable development that reflected the common European interest in building a green and fair future based on a participative and cooperative approach.

The Commissioner said that, together with the EESC, “we will make sure that it is put into practice in a way that is as close as possible to local communities, European citizens and their homes.”

Various Diversity Europe Group Members took the floor in the general debate.

EESC TEN section president Baiba Miltonoviča confirmed that the EESC is working on the European Renovation Wave, the New European Bauhaus initiative and Minimum Energy Performance Certificates for buildings. The initiative introduced a new lifestyle integrating the green transition. Ms Miltonoviča also said that the EESC supported regulatory analysis as a priority of the initiative.

Martin Böhme said that the New Bauhaus initiative could benefit all the European citizens if the right framework conditions were effectively put in place.

Arnaud Schwartz congratulated Ms Gabriel on the initiative and expressed his full support for it, not least because the initiative could create new job opportunities.

Diversity Europe Group vice-president Rudolf Kolbe, co-rapporteur for the relevant EESC opinion, stated that the New Bauhaus initiative and the EU Green Deal were interrelated and would both help to promote the circular economy. He called for the initiative to seek to meet the needs of ordinary citizens.

Luca Jahier stressed the need to adopt a co-participation and a co-creation approach. In the ongoing green and digital transitions, the widest possible participation of Europeans had to be ensured.

Save Bees and Farmers ECI at the EESC plenary session

The Save Bees and Farmers European Citizens Initiative (ECI) was presented to the EESC plenary session by Dr Helmut Burtscsher-Schaden, a biochemist at GLOBAL 2000-Friends of the Earth Austria, at the last plenary session.

In her welcome address, EESC president Christa Schweng said that the EESC fully supported the initiative and that the Committee had already hosted the initiators of four out of the six successful ECIs so far during its plenary sessions. Ms Schweng said that the debate was very timely as the EESC would soon start drafting an opinion on the sustainable use of pesticides with the ultimate aim of reducing risks and ensuring a healthy ecosystem. “We’ve been calling for years for a comprehensive EU food policy”, she declared, adding that “the (plenary) debate was not about proving what or who is right or wrong, but about raising awareness”.

Krzysztof Balon mentioned that the original Bauhaus idea had been destroyed by the Nazi government and therefore asked EESC Members, in the current political context, to carefully defend and preserve this new initiative and to make sure Ukraine could participate in it.

The concluding part of the debate further stressed the importance of the partnership between the EESC and the European Commission, with both EESC president Christa Schweng and European Commissioner Mariya Gabriel expressing their satisfaction concerning the closer strategic relationship between the two institutions.

In the EESC opinion on the New European Bauhaus, drawn up by Pierre Jean Coulon (Workers’ Group) and Rudolf Kolbe and adopted at the February plenary session, the EESC emphasises that it is vital to ensure wide access to financing, providing opportunities and special support measures for those without the means to apply for funding themselves and involving in the process small businesses, craftspeople and associations in particular.

A video recording of the plenary debate is available at: https://fb.watch/cHE_KUa96L/

2. EESC section for transport, energy, infrastructure and the information society, https://europa.eu/!kn94kX
5. EESC opinion, https://europa.eu/!YV6Bb7
7. ECI Save Bees and Farmers, https://www.savebeesandfarmers.eu/eng
Mr Burtsch- Schaden introduced the initiative, which had started in autumn 2019. “Moving out of artificial pesticides was our major demand”, he declared, adding that several obstacles had been faced since then, particularly coming from lobbying groups attempting to narrow the range of action of the Farm to Fork Strategy. He lastly pledged that the initiative would continue to protect agriculture from the threats of climate change and loss of biodiversity.

The initiative was the topic of the following general discussion, in which several Diversity Europe Group Members took the floor. Diversity Europe Group vice-president Kinga Joó reiterated that the EESC had always been supportive of the ECIs since they were first introduced a decade ago, creating the annual event “ECI day”. Ms Joó recalled one of the conclusions of the last ECI day, stating that initiatives have to be taken seriously and should have a real impact on EU legislation.

Lutz Ribbe, president of the EESC Sustainable Development Observatory and representative of an environmental organisation, called for the EU to support the initiative. Ms Ribbe advocated greater awareness with regard to bees, which were one of the most useful and efficient animal species, warning that some of the current policies were harming them.

Andreas Thurner, who chair the Committee’s Thematic Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems and represents the interests of Austrian farmers at the Committee, doubted that the initiative would be feasible, adding that it would be very burdensome for farmers and that some pesticides might have crucial importance for agriculture as they are not all necessarily harmful.

OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 23 and 24 March 2022. The EESC plenary adopted 27 opinions and 1 resolution, 11 of which were drafted by Members of the Diversity Europe Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU), rapporteur, SOC/704 EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life
Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR), rapporteur, NAT/853 Improving environmental protection through criminal law
Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR), rapporteur, TEN/760 What conditions are needed for the energy and low-carbon transition to be socially acceptable?
Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR), rapporteur, NAT/838 New EU Soil Strategy
Benjamin RIZZO (MT), rapporteur, ECO/572 Fight the use of shell entities
Francisco Javier GARAT PÉREZ (ES), rapporteur-general, NAT/865 Conservation and enforcement measures – NAFO
Lidija PAVIĆ-ROGOŠIĆ (HR), rapporteur, NAT/839 EU Long-term vision for rural areas
Mordechaj Martin SALAMON (DK), rapporteur, TEN/763 Revision of the energy performance of buildings directive
Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT), co-rapporteur, SOC/707 Migrant smuggling
Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI (IT), rapporteur, SOC/690 The EU action for Post COVID-19 period: recovering better through sport
Séamus BOLAND (IE), rapporteur, Resolution on “War in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact”

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 15 and 16 June 2022. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

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

Extraordinary meeting of the Bureau of the Diversity Europe Group
09.06.2022 | 10:00 – 17:30 | Bridge House Hotel, Tulbagh, Ireland

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