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Employers' Group

Newsletter

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European Entrepreneurship Forum: TIME FOR A NEW OPENING FOR SMES



A fair, competitive and sustainable business environment that encourages enterprises to grow, innovate, invest and trade – this is what representatives of the European employers ask from the next European Commission and the Member States. The participants at the European Entrepreneurship Forum, held on 10 April in Bucharest, agreed that it is time for a political recognition of SMEs – shifting from a "think small first" approach to an "act small first" principle.

The President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, opened the forum. In his speech, he said that the development of entrepreneurship is one of the keys to strengthening economic convergence and social cohesion in Europe. This convergence and social cohesion should be built as part of the same set of European values: democracy, freedom and the rule of law. Mr Iohannis underlined that Europe needs a "new entrepreneurial boost", needs to encourage the uptake of "creative risks" and stimulate investment in research and innovation. It is imperative to mobilise under-utilised resources such as the creative energies of the younger generation or female

entrepreneurship. "Europeans must recognise that entrepreneurship and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises are pillars of Europe's overall prosperity and competitiveness", he said.

"SMEs and entrepreneurs have a significant role to play in shaping the future of Europe," said Jacek Krawczyk, President of the Employers' Group. Thriving businesses provide citizens with jobs, goods and services. To make it happen, the employers call for a competitive business environment that encourages enterprises to innovate, invest and trade. Mr Krawczyk welcomed the efforts of the Romanian Presidency to enhance what counts the most for business: competitiveness, entrepreneurship and industrial policy. "The support of entrepreneurship including the support of SMEs is a common goal of employers' organisations. It is important to convey this message to the post-election policy makers", Mr Krawczyk said.

Ulrike Rabmer-Koller, President of SMEunited recalled that the upcoming elections would have a decisive impact on the future of the EU. SMEs, providing over 2/3 of all EU jobs and representing over 99% of businesses have enormous importance for European societies. With the advance of digitalisation, even SMEs are facing global competition in their daily operations. "That is why it is important to ensure fairness and a level playing field for all companies", Ms Rabmer-Koller said. In her view, "SMEs are ready to ensure Europe's future and to seize the opportunities of new challenges like digitalisation and circular economy. This requires Europe to provide them with a modern legislative framework without unnecessary administrative burdens and a facilitating environment ensuring the development of the right skills, financial support, future-proof infrastructure and standardisation".

Florin Jianu, President of the Romanian National Council of SMEs (CNIPMMR) emphasised that for the last 10 years, the Small Business Act has been the roadmap for the European entrepreneurial environment. Some of the 10 principles of the SBA have moved ahead while the EU is still lagging behind in others (such as the Single Market and a second chance for SMEs). In his opinion, the SBA certainly created and added value for the EU and for the entrepreneurial environment. However, it is time to learn the lessons from this roadmap and take a step further. "It is not enough to favour some actions to the detriment of others; we have to implement all measures so that we have a viable ecosystem, and we must think how we can stimulate Member States to implement the future Small Business Act", Mr Jianu said.



The Bucharest Declaration signed

During the European Entrepreneurship Forum, held on 10 April 2019 in Bucharest, the Presidents of the EESC Employers' Group, SMEunited and the Romanian National Council of SMEs (CNIPMMR) signed the Bucharest Declaration in the presence of the President of Romania. The document contains a set of proposals for policy makers to boost entrepreneurship in the European Union and to allow SMEs to flourish.

Entrepreneurial mind-set, proper education, social recognition

The declaration underlines the importance of recognising the role of entrepreneurs for both the economy and society. It emphasises the need to teach an entrepreneurial mind-set starting at an early age. Only in this way can the EU ensure that there will be a new generation of entrepreneurs, creating and rising to the top of enterprises.

In this context, education policies must focus more in the future on workplace learning, supporting Vocational Education and Training (VET), Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) areas, digital skills and apprenticeships. SMEs have to have access to a skilled and competent workforce. In addition, entrepreneurs themselves need coaching opportunities and advice. Here, business organisations have a role to play in encouraging exchange of best practices.

Benefiting from the opportunities of the future

We are witnessing a major transformation of our societies due to megatrends such as digitalisation or the circular economy. SMEs need to prepare for this change to be able to benefit from its opportunities. This requires proper financial support for innovation and digitalisation, a future-proof infrastructure, access to data, etc.

The declaration also touches upon access to finance. SMEs are looking into alternative forms of finance (such as lending platforms and crowd investment) while calling for better access to bank loans. New financial instruments within the next European Multiannual Financial Framework will also have a role to play. They should focus on innovation and allow SMEs to go for more risky projects.

Legislation: better implementation and less bureaucracy

The signatories of the declaration underline that unequal implementation and enforcement of EU legislation in Member States remains a challenge especially for SMEs. Implementation and enforcement of EU legislation should be timely and complete in ALL Member States. Governments must at any cost avoid gold plating as this creates additional burdens, barriers and inconsistencies.

When talking about internationalisation of SMEs – both within the EU Single Market and beyond - SMEs need a fair balance with other stakeholders; this means respecting the freedom to conduct business and tackling unfair trading practices in B2B relationships. "The EU needs to take a bolder approach to supporting SME development. European SME policy must be more efficient, and must cover different types of enterprises", the declaration reads.

The forum consisted of four workshops focusing on various aspects of entrepreneurship: financing, youth and female entrepreneurship, digitalisation and the role of cohesion and regional development.

Financing entrepreneurship

The first workshop focused, inter alia, on banking regulations, which incentivise lending to SMEs, supporting alternative forms of finance and new financial instruments, which focus on innovation and investments.

The speakers pointed out that there is often a lack of understanding between SMEs and banks. There is a clear need for continuous dialogue between these two groups in order to raise awareness of each other's needs and conditions. The banking sector and SMEs have different approaches, i.e. to risk, and have different operational timeframes.

Innovation in the banking sector could also make financing SMEs more attractive (which is currently often not the case due to procedures that require time and workforce – which is why banks often turn to larger companies that take out larger loans and are less risky). The entrepreneurs themselves often lack economic and financial education that would help them in negotiations with banks.

The panellists gave concrete examples of good practices such as the credit barometer (making it possible to compare offers), assistance organised by SME associations in negotiations with banks, or credit mediators – a function for companies facing difficulties in obtaining credit.



Predictability and transparency of legislation, as well as cutting red tape, have an impact on access to finance and on resources that SMEs need to develop. Moreover, SMEs should focus more on alternative forms of financing such as crowd funding or platforms.

Young and women entrepreneurs

The theme of the second workshop was young and women entrepreneurs. The panellists discussed the measures necessary for promoting and supporting young/women entrepreneurs at national and European level.

Figures clearly show that female entrepreneurship has a huge untapped potential: while women make up 52% of European citizens, only 34% of self-employed people are women. Women are still facing discouraging social and cultural attitudes towards their role in the society. That is why it is necessary to change mind-sets. This requires proper education, better exchange of good practices as well as more positive role models (in which the media have a role to play).

All panellists underlined the importance of entrepreneurial education starting at an early stage. This is necessary for young people to be willing to become entrepreneurs. It is also important to improve the image of entrepreneurs, which suffers from stereotypes. Adjusting education systems to provide proper skills to future entrepreneurs is another urgent need.

The participants of the debate pointed out a number of good practices that help boost young entrepreneurship such as Erasmus for entrepreneurs or BusinessRail Experience – a rail trip that allows young entrepreneurs to expand their network, exchange ideas and find potential business partners.

Digital Europe

The third workshop focused on digitalisation: the opportunities offered by digitalisation, the framework conditions and elements necessary to benefit from digitalisation.

Only 37% of SMEs' employees have sufficient digital skills, while 42% of consumers have such skills. This means that consumers are often more prepared for digital change than companies are. This issue has to be addressed.

According to estimations, the EU needs over 150 billion EUR of investment to face the challenges of the ongoing digital revolution. The panellists underlined that without this investment, Europe will lose the competitiveness race to other regions. This includes investments in cybersecurity.

Some European SMEs are frontrunners in digital transformation but in many traditional sectors there is a great need to adapt. This requires an enabling legal environment and technology-neutral approach. Moreover, to boost digitalisation of SMEs we have to provide them with proper digital infrastructure and access to data.

European cohesion and regional development

The last panel of the forum focused on the link between SMEs, cohesion policy and regional development. As the EU is currently working on its new Multiannual Financial Framework, it is a crucial moment for creating a more favourable ecosystem for SMEs through MFF instruments.

SMEs – deeply rooted in local communities – are strongly interconnected with regional development. On one hand, SMEs contribute to the economic growth of regions, and thus contribute to European cohesion. On the other hand, they need conditions to

grow that take into account specific aspects of rural or remote areas.

Concerning the next MFF, the panellists were against cuts in the budget for cohesion and expressed their appreciation for visible efforts to reduce bureaucracy linked to the use of the EU funds and instruments. It is important to keep social partners involved in designing the programmes as well as in execution and evaluation. This is a way to ensure that programmes are fit for purpose and that rules are flexible and take into account specificities of certain regions, countries or even sectors. This is already partially the case through monitoring committees of operational programmes.

In the future the cohesion policy and regional policy should shift gradually from grants to financial instruments (guarantees, low interest rate loans, etc.) but this requires proper preparation and education of the beneficiaries.

Debate with partner organisations

Key areas of interest to European employers' organisations for 2019 include strengthening the internal market, the EU budget, open markets, sustainable living, and Brexit. On 20 March, representatives of EUROCHAMBRES, EuroCommerce and Copa-Cogeca met with members of the Employers Group to discuss the issues they were going to focus on this year.

Arnaldo Abruzzini, Chief Executive Officer of EUROCHAMBRES, outlined the kind of Europe the business community wished to see. He emphasised that, from an entrepreneurial point of view, a closer and more open Europe would result in lower costs for the sector.

Mr Abruzzini called for the strengthening of elements that structurally guided business in the EU - the internal market. He stressed that implementation of the single market was a cornerstone of the EU project and should therefore not be taken for granted.

Regarding the upcoming European elections, Mr Abruzzini introduced the MEP Entrepreneur Index, a unique pilot project aimed at tracking MEPs' voting records in relation to issues of importance to entrepreneurs and thus to the creation of jobs and growth. Mr Abruzzini went on to explain that EUROCHAMBRES wished to make MEPs more accountable for how they voted on topics that were crucially important to the business community.

As regards foreign affairs, Mr Abruzzini said that the EU needed to interact more with other parts of the world. He concluded by saying that the planet had been shaped by the EU's capacity to trade and invest around the world.

Paulo Gouveia, Director of Copa-Cogeca, explained the difficulties that the agricultural sector was facing, especially the issue of average farm incomes continuing to lag behind other sectors of the economy. Regarding the EU budget, he stressed that the cuts in the budget allocated to the CAP were of critical importance to



Copa-Cogeca. In particular, it was pursuing the following issues: modernisation and simplification of the CAP; the bioeconomy as well as the commitments taken to ensure that SDGs were reached.

Furthermore, Copa-Cogeca was interested in the impact that trade would have on the agricultural sector. Mr Gouveia went on to say that Copa-Cogeca did not oppose trade provided it did not undermine the European agricultural sector. Concerning Brexit, he called for clarity on the issue and stressed the need for the impacts it would have on the agri sector to be minimised.

Christian Verschuere, Director General of EuroCommerce, emphasised that the retail sector was undergoing major changes, resulting in changes to the skillset needed and to the shape that the retail sector in towns and cities was taking. He outlined four key priorities for EuroCommerce: the need for a data economy; fair competition; open markets; and sustainable living. Creating a data economy was important, he said, as was ensuring fair competition across supply chains. Mr Verschuere concluded by saying that, regarding trade, EuroCommerce would continue to fight against protectionism while stressing the need to maximise the benefits of bilateral trade agreements.

EESC Employers call for an open, united and strong EU

Business representatives are committed to working for a strong and prosperous EU. The strength of the EU lies in its attractiveness. To further benefit from this "European way of life", we need a competitive business environment. These are just some of the main messages emerging from the Political Declaration that the Employers' Group adopted ahead of the European elections. On 9 April, the President of the Group, Jacek Krawczyk handed the declaration to the Vice-President of the European Commission, Jyrki Katainen. "We issued this declaration to be vocal about employers' support for the EU. The benefits the EU brings are obvious for everyone doing business but too often we forgot about them in daily life. The employers want to change this" – stated President Krawczyk.



We as European delegates for employers and entrepreneurs stand for the European Union and its values of democracy, freedom, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

We are committed to working for a strong EU. Only a strong EU can succeed against a backdrop of global competition, uncertainty and disruption, and provide European citizens with security and wellbeing. A strong EU is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable and resilient.

We believe that the EU is stronger the more united it is – in its diversity. Unity brings about internal efficiency and external influence. It is a matter of common objectives, decisions and action, to tackle issues that cannot be managed through national measures alone.

We are convinced that the strength of the EU lies in its attractiveness: in its ability to enable citizens to enjoy the European way of life. To make this possible, the EU needs to be a good place to do business.

We call for a competitive business environment that encourages enterprises to innovate, invest and trade. This enables businesses to thrive and provide citizens with jobs, goods and services. It also enables the generation of public revenue for education, healthcare and social systems, as well as for internal and external security. Economic and social progress thus go hand in hand.

We firmly believe in an open economy - with open markets and fair competition. While providing businesses with larger markets and better access to resources, it benefits citizens with a wider choice of goods and services and the possibility to travel, study and work abroad. We therefore call for fully functioning single market and rules-based foreign trade.

We think that an open economy must be accompanied by an open society. We are concerned about populistic, authoritarian and xenophobic movements that work against the principles of an open society built on the common core values of the EU.

We are in favour of a society that relies on dialogue and good governance. It implies that decision-making is based on democracy, full compliance with the rule of law, subsidiarity principle, transparency, and the involvement of civil society. Vibrant civil society and social dialogue are vital guarantees of a progressive and cohesive society.

We call for enabling and encouraging policies that stimulate creativity, innovation, ongoing learning, agility and entrepreneurial spirit throughout society. An open society relies on freedom and responsibility, not on command and control.

We respect diversity and believe it is a great asset for the EU. This applies to the richness of cultures and natural features across countries. It also applies to diversity in terms of gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, age, religion and beliefs or any other personal characteristic.

We are confident that openness increases stability and security – both in the economy and society, due to stronger interdependence and interaction. Instead of fences, the EU therefore needs connecting bridges.

In conclusion, we believe that an open economy and society are beneficial for all and would generate new confidence in the EU. This is how the positive spiral of an open, united and strong EU can and should continue.

A Europe working for people

Writing a Europe-wide report on the economic, technological and social transformation of advanced health services for the elderly means nurturing some kind of hope. It is a modest attempt to reverse the programming of human obsolescence. It is an attempt to open up horizons for our elderly, whose needs we have failed to adequately foresee.

Technology promises to help us cope, but the costs are high, especially as life expectancy is rising and there are **ethical** considerations to bear in mind. Addressing this is the aim of our report, which is intended to be political because it is **comprehensive**.

At the beginning of our recent history, public authorities were providers of services to the elderly and at the same time helped to cater to the demands of households. More and more, however, the commodification and monetisation of services has transformed this role, turning public authorities more into **market regulators** who put in place procedures to try to ensure the effectiveness of the market. They have not made a good job of this, leading to shortcomings and abuses because the state is not regulating enough. We therefore recommend that Member States and European public authorities in general introduce **quality control** and investment stimulation **measures** that all the partners can trust.

The challenge we face is also because we do not have a realistic picture of the socio-demographic realities of ageing. This is why we suggest a sound **statistical** measuring of the phenomenon, coupled with a social care and health approach. **National and regional monitoring bodies** could do this, brought together by a European coordinating platform.

On the supply side, we need to **reassess** the social and financial situation of carers and all those who provide personal services to our elderly. This is possible in **a Europe of services that no longer has to think just about competitiveness and can succeed where industrial Europe has partly failed**. This is a prerequisite for the proper introduction and take-up of new technologies. It can be achieved through healthy human relations and transparent "processes". We call for a **harmonised legal framework for personal services**.

For the social and healthcare professionals in charge of our elderly, who are often insufficiently trained and educated, we recommend a practical common base of **digital and social training**, including "best practices", modelled on the 2005 and 2013 directives on the recognition of professional qualifications.

On this basis, we must try to break down the rigid partitions between home care, institutional care and alternative forms of care and highlight the need for these to complement one another. We recommend greater **flexibility** and partnership between health services and the medical and social service spheres.

At the same time, we are calling for a **housing policy that works alongside ageing policy**. In some situations a flexible housing



policy is also a prerequisite. Alternative housing systems will have to be introduced to match the profiles and health conditions of our elderly.

The future of our older people requires substantial investment. Securing this will involve creating jobs. Strangely enough, the market meeting the needs of older people – the so-called **silver economy** – is highly **fragmented**.

It includes many small and medium-sized enterprises. Corporatist approaches, which are real technical barriers, need to be ended in order to reduce market fragmentation. There is no shortage of European **standards and certification schemes** for materials and equipment designed for older people.

What is needed is to stimulate **basic research** on human, social and epigenetic factors. We need Europe's industrialists to be more technologically mature and to find **answers that are joined up and incorporated into older people's daily lives**.

Telemedicine, sensors, protected platforms, flexible housing and so on are neither Star Wars nor matters for a snatched conversation in the lift. What will help older people, their carers and care staff to be co-creators and co-managers of controlled and smart care is **artificial intelligence** that is **properly mastered and ethical**.

Europe and the Member States must encourage investment geared to older people: this is a **huge human AND financial challenge**. It is for all these good reasons that we call for a **finance round table** that brings together countries, local authorities, pension funds, insurers, banks, mutual societies, the Commission, the EIB and so on to ensure the sustainability of good services for the older generation and to make recommendations for fair and transparent prices for services.



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The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

More than 180 representatives of civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and the EU took part in the 7th edition of the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum that took place on 16 and 17 April in Tirana, Albania. The Forum brought together representatives of Western Balkans trade unions, employers and civil society organisations, EESC members, representatives of the governments of the Western Balkans, and EU and international institutions. It is organised every two years and is part of the work of the EESC Follow-up Committee.

The Forum provided the opportunity for participants to assess and to discuss the prospects for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans; the role of social partners and civil society organisations in promoting regional cooperation (in trade and investment, connectivity and people-to-people relations); and the state of social dialogue and of enabling civic space in the Western Balkans. The Forum concluded with a call for the next Commission to maintain the Western Balkans enlargement policy as one of its priorities in the interest of both the region and of the EU.

Serious concerns were expressed at the Forum from the CSOs from the region on a number of issues such as the state of economic reforms, youth unemployment, functioning of social dialogue, shrinking space for civil society and suppression of media freedoms.

Despite good intentions and great expectations for furthering the enlargement process initiated by the EC in February last year with the strategy paper and its action plan, and the Bulgarian Presidency in the first half of 2018 putting enlargement at the fore of its priorities, last year was marked by deep divisions in MS over enlargement. The Sofia summit and June EU Council did not produce a clear commitment for enlargement, but vague promises, talking more about engagement in the Western Balkans (WB) and less about enlargement.

There are even more challenges ahead this year. If in the forthcoming May EP elections Eurosceptic populists, who tend to equate enlargement with immigration and / or are against EU enlargement in general, gain a significant number of seats, it could further stall the enlargement process and could influence the attitude of Member States at the June General Affairs Council. This will result in disappointments for Albania and North Macedonia, who are expecting to have a date to start accession negotiations. At the same time if clear signals and commitment of the EU to the European prospects of the region are not given, it could lead to worsening of the current situation, to the general detriment of the reform process in the WB. The lack of EU engagement in the region will also give space to other global players.

The situation in WB countries is not that promising either. While in general WB countries have made progress with necessary reforms in rule of law, fundamental rights, judicial reform and the fight against corruption, it is far from the desired outcome and concrete



results. Much more needs to be done in order for these countries to become viable democracies and societies.

Recent developments in the WB could be a cause for concern, and here I shall list just some of them:

- Shrinking civic space and suppression of free media,
- state politics run the real economy – state capture,
- politicised judiciary,
- tariffs imposed by Kosovo* on imports from Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina,
- unresolved bilateral issues, belligerent rhetoric between Serbia and Kosovo*
- lack of culture of political dialogue and political polarisation, in Albania opposition left the parliament,
- popular discontent and anti-government protests in Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Albania,
- deeply divided and dysfunctional nature of the government in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These developments together with an increasingly volatile environment and internal and external geopolitical risks pose a serious threat to the stability of the region and its rapprochement with the EU.

The best news last year was the resolution of the dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the name issue. However, its implementation will require a major effort in building lasting trust across the political divide in Macedonia.

Against this background what can we at the EESC do?

The EESC is actively engaged in the enlargement process of the EU and has developed a dual approach – regional and bilateral – for its relations with civil society organisations (CSOs) in the enlargement countries. The Western Balkans Follow-up Committee is the main regional instrument for coordinating the EESC's activities in this region and, bilaterally with countries that have started the accession process, the EESC works through the Joint Consultative Committees established with Serbia and Montenegro.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

This structure and dedication of EESC members allow us to continue to support and advocate for the enlargement agenda and a genuine re-engagement with six WB partners provided all preconditions are met. We must be vocal about it and send clear messages to the WB governments and EU institutions. Since we believe that strong civil society remains a crucial factor for the development of the region in order to ensure greater government accountability, particularly in the absence of the normal checks and balances, we shall continue and enhance our cooperation and support of the CSOs in the WB. Once North Macedonia and Albania start accession negotiations the EESC will enhance cooperation with these countries and establish Joint Consultative Committees.

Just a couple of days ago, on 1 May, the EU celebrated the 15th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement, when 10 countries acceded to the European Union. This is a good time to assess and look at the positive benefits of enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries and to the enlarged EU.

In conclusion, let me paraphrase the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker's words: "The accession of the Central and Eastern European countries, and the courage of their people in preparing for that accession, is what allowed us to reconcile our continent's geography with its history." In my opinion, the full meaning of reconciling Europe's geography with its history will be achieved with the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkan region once it is ready for this. For this to happen there needs to be a clear signal and support for future enlargement from the EU, and clear commitment and concrete results in necessary reforms from the six WB partners.



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Study visit to the University of Aachen

Gaining hands-on experience of the production engineering of e-mobility components (PEM) and electric car development with "e.GO" at RWTH Aachen University – this was the aim of the visit made by Transport Category members on 28 March 2018.

The cluster at the University of Aachen is an excellent example of a partnership where academia and industry team up to conduct future-oriented, technology-driven research across the whole e-mobility value chain in order to develop e-mobility vehicles.

Three top PEM engineers, Georg Bergweiler, Patrick Treichel and Tom Moller welcomed the members. They explained how the cluster has developed since 2014 to become a cradle of innovation with rapid growth and various spin-offs. They also discussed the future of electric mobility – one of the keys to sustainable, low-carbon and environmentally-compatible mobility – with the members.

At the end of the presentation, the members were welcomed into the laboratories, where they saw state-of-the-art technologies for batteries and electric motor development. The visit ended with a tour of electric car developer e.GO's show



room. E.GO uses the science and industry network on RWTH Aachen's Campus both to create cost-efficient prototypes and for small series production, with the help of Industry 4.0 technology.

The production engineering cluster on RWTH Aachen's campus is one of the largest research laboratories for production engineering and Industry 4.0 in Europe. It taps into all the resources offered by the university and its entire network of technology, expertise, infrastructure, human capital, partnerships and capital, making them available to entrepreneurs as well as to other startup teams.

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