**Ref/no. 20/2021 27 April 2021**

**Conference on the Future of Europe – The EESC calls for a new narrative with civil society in the driving seat**

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted at its April plenary session a resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe in which it calls on "a new narrative grounded on the realities of everyday life" to reconnect and engage with European citizens. For this, according to the resolution, it is essential to ensure that organised civil society is involved and plays a major role.**

The resolution adopted by the EESC with the title *A new narrative for Europe* contains a series of recommendations to make the most of the opportunity presented by the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) to design a more prosperous, sustainable and equitable future for the EU. The document also claims a relevant role for organized civil society and, consequently, for the EESC as the best placed body to "effectively involve the organized civil society as it has the respective networks to do so".

The President of the EESC, **Christa Schweng**, stressed the importance of achieving tangible outcomes: *"The Conference must make concrete and measurable progress and not just consist of non-binding discussions; that means the ideas expressed during the Conference events should result in concrete recommendations for EU actions"*, she said.

Ms Schweng also insisted on the need to regain citizens' ownership of the EU: *"The future of Europe also needs a new, positive narrative. We have to prove and remind that Europe is a great place to be and to prosper. Moreover, the voice of the organised European civil society cannot be side-lined: if we really want to bring the European project back to citizens, civil society should be in a driving seat"*.

**Competitiveness and inclusiveness**

Among other aspects, the resolution outlines the need of a "fair and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that paves the way to a more inclusive society and builds long-term competitiveness". In the view of the EESC, the impact of the pandemic has highlighted the need of a common European approach: "COVID-19 also made clear that sustainable competitiveness has to be supported and that investment in quality health, care, education and social services have to be increased across the EU".

The adopted text also recognizes the "paramount importance" of the double green and digital transition and the need to use the opportunity represented by the CoFoE to modernise and transform the EU's industrial sectors and their supply chains, so that they remain competitive in a world of lower emissions.

At the same time, the EESC insists also on the importance of the social partners: "Only by placing both companies and workers at the very heart of the recovery and future policies Europe can succeed. Competitiveness and inclusiveness have to go hand in hand: the best performing Member States, from an economic point of view, are those who have the highest social standards, not vice-versa", says the resolution.

As for the role of civil society at the CoFoE, the EESC is invited to act via its members in the Conference plenary and as observers in the Executive Board as an institutional intermediary between the Conference and national organisations representing civil society. Furthermore, the EESC ask that the EU supports "the pivotal role played by civil society organisations in promoting and defending European values, democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, against increasing illiberalism, populism and 'shrinking civic space'".

The overarching idea is that the CoFoE should be the vehicle to bring about long-lasting change in the EU, including an increased and more meaningful involvement of citizens and of organised civil society in the European public sphere

**A strong political message**

The Presidents of the three groups represented at the EESC acted as joint rapporteurs, thus highlighting the strong consensus behind the resolution. **Stefano Mallia**, President of the Employers Group, mentioned the importance of the strong political message sent by the EESC: *"What we are presenting today is our vision for the EU of the next decades, a Union that efficiently focuses on the most pressing needs and expectations of European companies, workers and citizens; makes a tangible difference where it is needed the most; and effectively involves its citizens across borders"*. Mr Mallia also insisted on the need of a strong and resilient industrial basis, a genuine digital single market and a defence of open markets and warned that *"in terms of follow-up and expectations management the EU's credibility is clearly at stake here"*.

For Workers' Group President **Oliver Röpke**, the Conference can be *"an opportunity to give a new impetus to our vision of the Union built on strengthening the links between the people of Europe and rooted in the values of solidarity, social justice, intergenerational cooperation, gender equality, sustainable prosperity and a fair green and digital transition"*. And he concluded: *"This is why all actors should address its deliberations with an open mind, with no foregone conclusions on next steps, with all options on the table, taking particularly into account citizens' and civil society's input and making sure that their ideas result in concrete recommendations for EU policy"*.

In representation of the Diversity Europe Group, its President **Séamus Boland** outlined the social dimension of CoFoE: *"The Conference is an opportunity to bring about sustainable and people centred change; now is the time to leverage public support for the values of solidarity, social justice, inter-generational cooperation, all forms of equality, just green and digital transitions, in order to rethink our growth and governance models and to build a more equal society based on citizen's well-being and development beyond GDP, whilst also respecting the opinions and rights of citizens"*, he said. Mr Boland also insisted on the role of civil society: *"What we want to see come out of the Conference is a genuine recognition by European and national authorities that civil society is integral to identifying solutions and has a key role in building trust, shaping public opinions and acting as positive agents of change"*.

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[VIDEO: The EESC from the inside](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/avdb/video/eesc-inside)

*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process. The Committee has 329 members from across Europe, who are appointed by the Council of the European Union.*