



# **“Dessine-moi...” (Draw me...)”**



**Story of the pandemic told in 43 testimonials  
by EESC members**

September 2020



**European Economic  
and Social Committee**

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# "Tell me your story"

- Preface - *Isabel Caño Aguilar, Vice-President for Communication*

At first, we did not understand what was happening to us. The pandemic has changed our habits, our pace of life, our relationships and the way we see things. New expressions have entered our everyday vocabulary, such as COVID-19, lockdown, coronavirus, mask, quarantine... followed later by release from lockdown, social distancing...

Fear has prevailed over serenity, anxiety has replaced wellbeing. Virtual interaction has taken over from direct contact. We are cautious where before we were daring.

Having understood that each of us has a unique experience of this period, we invited some of our members to share their stories with the readers of EESCinfo. From April to September 2020, we published their testimonies. The title "Dessine-moi..." (Draw me...), borrowed from Saint-Exupéry's book, refers to "The Little Prince", who asks the pilot to draw him a sheep, in other words, to describe something that cannot be seen.

For the first issue, we invited our vice-president for the budget, Milena Angelova, to share her own experiences. Her response was swift, and others have since followed suit.

The members responded creatively to our invitation and took us on a journey into their private worlds, where they offered us a mosaic of landscapes, images, colours and sounds.

Yet they also offered us their reflections on the crisis and the way it has been managed, both in terms of their individual arrangements and actions and those of their organisations, thus providing a snapshot of civil society engaged in the fight against COVID.

It is for this reason that we are delighted to bring together a collection of 43 members' testimonies, representing both men and women as well as the three groups and the 27 EU Member States. I therefore invite you to immerse yourselves in these moments of living and sharing that are frozen in time.

We must now bring to an end this beautiful journey from Helsinki to Athens, from Warsaw to Valetta, and from Madrid to Sofia. Our members have opened the doors of their libraries. We have entered their offices and their private spaces. We have wandered among Greek olive trees and pots of basil, and braved the earthquake-hit streets of Croatia. We bore silent witness to their work and learned which music they prefer. We explored hospitals corridors in Bergamo. We heard our members' joy in being reunited with their families. We shared their concerns about the problems they were facing. Ultimately, we have demonstrated that the commitment of our members goes above and beyond our daily work and our legislative mandate. This is what our Committee does.

I would like to thank all our authors for taking part in our project. We are publishing this booklet to make sure that these stories are known - authentic stories that are so much more important because of the intensity with which they were experienced. These are stories that testify to a difficult period, a period that will leave its traces, yet they also bear witness to the work of our Committee on the ground.

I would also like to thank the Press and the VIP unit for putting together this booklet. As has been the case throughout the COVID period, the effort made by our teams has been immense.



Isabel Caño Aguilar:

# “In the time of coronavirus”

## *Vice-President for Communication*

We are experiencing exceptional and unusual circumstances.

On the one hand, we are isolated in our own countries, our own homes, and on the other hand, we know that the world cannot stop and that civil society keeps getting up every morning and starting work.

This unprecedented situation is placing a heavy emotional burden on all of us.

And it's hard to imagine what the consequences of each new day will be. Every aspect of our professional and private lives has been affected.

Firstly, I would like to mention the public services, especially those looking after our health – dedicated professionals who are shouldering their responsibilities, working overtime and putting in every effort to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed and health services from collapsing. Since 15 March, I have joined in the applause from balconies at 8 p.m. every day. In so doing, I am not only helping to show appreciation for this mammoth task, I am also supporting a clear demand: more resources for our public health systems!

In particular, I would like to thank and highlight the efforts of all the healthcare staff at the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Granada's San Cecilio Clinical University Hospital, who shared with us the photo published in this edition of EESCInfo.

To mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, the WHO is celebrating the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife in 2020. These men and women fulfil a crucial role and provide essential services, and continue to do so during the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis.

They are not the only ones. We sometimes forget an equally vital sector, education, in which I'm proud to have worked. Millions of students across Europe are confined to their homes and would not be able to continue learning without the constant and tireless support of education workers.

Never before has the work of these sectors been so much in the public spotlight and, personally, I think that this recognition should turn into a commitment from the EU to abandon the austerity measures that left them underfunded and instead introduce specific measures and allocate larger budgets.



We won't be able to overcome this crisis without the civil society organisations that are working on the ground every day, but we need decisive action from the EU.

With the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration just days away, now more than ever we need strong impetus and commitment from the EU. The right measures and action need to be taken, including with regard to the budget, so that EU citizens can see that the EU is still an exciting project and not just an acronym.

In these testing times, which will have a lasting effect on our society, we must, above all, be able to convey the idea that another Europe – a stronger and better Europe – is possible.

Milena Angelova:

# “A challenge we shall overcome”

## *Vice-President for Budget*

COVID-19 is the biggest challenge we have faced this century. I shall not focus on the negative effects it causes – on our lives, basic rights and freedoms, the economy and wellbeing. Rather I will try to propose a positive and pragmatic view of how to make the most of the current situation. We can deal with this together, if we stay focused, work as a team and be responsible.

## **Business More Effective Than Usual**

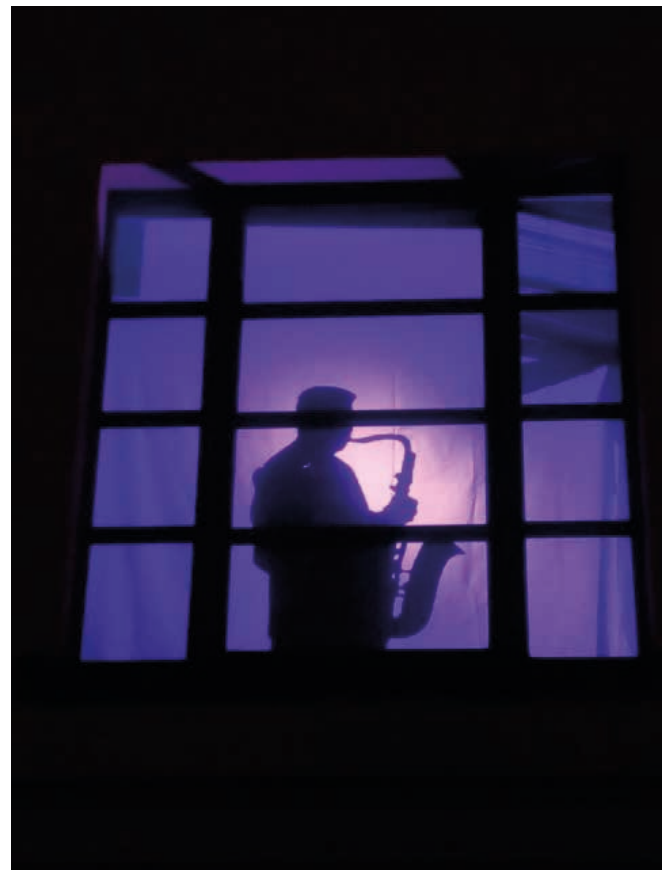
Our homes are now not only our castles: they are everything for us – office, school, communication centres, entertainment and eating-out venues... This presents a unique opportunity for families to become more united and to benefit from being together and engaging in a team building exercise to ensure that each and every member of the family is comfortably equipped to perform effectively their daily obligations – work, classes, communication, sport. My family, for example, has managed to set up two school rooms (one for each of our two sons), two home offices and a multimedia centre – from where my husband and I attend remote meetings and give interviews to the media – as well as an improvised gym to keep fit even while being locked down. The kids have all their classes on-line – and even their karate workouts!

## **Keeping Spirits High and Capturing Beautiful Moments**

Even though the lockdown encroaches on the basic freedoms of us all – being free to choose where to go, to travel, work and take active relaxation – we still can stay positive and find beautiful moments to enjoy every day. Giving a structure to the day definitely helps us to stay focused and motivated. Personally, I have a very tight schedule, as I have to divide my time between taking care of the kids, finding time for exercise (no compromise – at least 90 mins. of gym a day), working for BICA – we are currently very actively negotiating with the Bulgarian government on anti-crisis measures in support of business and employment – and of course – last but not least – for the EESC. Being able to communicate with all my

colleagues only remotely means it takes more time and effort to coordinate and prepare the substance of discussions, and even the simplest tasks are made complicated by the distance. But then it is more rewording and satisfying when success is achieved.

No one knows how long the current situation will continue, or when we will get our normal lives back. But whatever it takes, we will defeat this pandemic together and will be back to our normal, undisturbed lives, free of restrictions and fear. Until then we shall be joining our efforts and continuing to carry out our everyday work and our routines and still enjoy beautiful moments, since even the lockdown is a part of our lives and – if taken in a positive spirit – could offer moments of happiness.



Giuseppe Guerini:

# "Solidarity against coronavirus"

## **Mr Guerini, how are you coping at this very difficult time?**

I am feeling tremendous pressure, both professionally and personally. I live in Bergamo, at the epicentre of the epidemic in Italy and we are being overwhelmed by the suffering here and the sheer number of dead, with worry and a feeling of powerlessness gnawing away at us all the time. We all have friends, colleagues or acquaintances who have either died or who are fighting for their lives in intensive care units.

## **As president of an association of cooperatives, how are you coping on the front line?**

As president, I have to deal personally with the many crises that the cooperatives which I represent have been handling since 23 February when we realised that the virus was spreading and we had to make decisions, at a time when nothing was clear, regarding the line to be taken by the many services we manage. Our cooperatives in Bergamo employ over 9000 workers in social and healthcare services and manage care and home help services, residential and daycare centres for elderly and disabled people. In some cases we decided to close, but were then faced with threats from the local authorities insisting that the services remain operational. The tension was almost unbearable for hours. We then had days and weeks of constantly rising tension and anxiety: the terrible, desperate rush to secure protective gear for our workers, along with worry over having to ensure that certain care and home help services remained operational, despite limited resources and the fear that service providers and recipients might be infected. And unfortunately, that fear was only too justified, particularly in residential facilities for elderly people.

## **So have the cooperatives continued to operate, or have some of them had to put a halt to their activities?**

Well, alongside the difficulties I've just described, we have also had to cope with the fact that one business and activity after another has had to close: first it was schools and other educational establishments, then gradually other sectors. We now have over 180 cooperatives which have had to activate social shock absorbers for around 2500 people and which are now in danger of not being able to start up again. The crisis is having a devastating effect on the tourism and cultural sectors, as well as on agricultural processing and manufacturing cooperatives. As president of an association of cooperatives, I have to cope with a double-edged crisis: people who are overwhelmed because their workload in the sector of home help and essential services has exploded and who are at great risk of infection, and people who are afraid and anxious because they have lost their jobs.

## **What part of the response to the coronavirus crisis has worked?**

What has worked, at least in our case, has been the incredible movement of solidarity and the response of the local communities, volunteer associations and social organisations which have achieved miracles when it comes to collecting donations and doing what has had to be done. Social and healthcare workers have worked selflessly. Doctors and nurses, but also many teachers and carers have kept on working at considerable risk to themselves. Society has also achieved truly impressive feats. In just ten days in Bergamo (and in other cities as well), field hospitals have been set up using fairground tents, with huge numbers of volunteers working night and day for no pay to get them ready. Doctors and nurses from various NGOs have taken on the task of managing many of them, while the costs were covered by donations. In Bergamo again, we set up three hotels with over 300 beds for patients sent out by the hospitals as soon as they are in stable condition so as to free up hospital beds. Our social cooperatives have taken on the duties of caring for patients in these hotels. It has involved a huge amount of work but is a vital service.

## **What hasn't worked?**

The biggest problems are at institutional level: public authorities have been unable to make clear decisions in good time, or to adopt a common approach on planning or acting with regard to the crisis: the local, regional and national authorities have been issuing contradictory decisions. We've been seeing a bureaucracy overly concerned with shoring up its authority and passing the buck to operators. In fact, this has been a problem to varying extents not just in Italy and Bergamo, but in most western countries.

## **What do you think is the reason for this behaviour on the part of the various tiers of administration?**

I think that the situation in China was underestimated, as if people in the west felt that we were above such problems because we have an excellent healthcare system with very advanced technology and very modern hospitals. It's as if too many leaders, along with company directors and individuals were convinced that the western lifestyle and the supposition that we could rely on a high level of hospitals and healthcare facilities would protect us. In the first few days after the epidemic appeared in Lombardy, anyone expressing real concern was laughed at. This feeling of "superiority" is perhaps best expressed in a now infamous comment by an Italian regional president accusing the Chinese of neglecting personal hygiene and eating live mice; this comment reflected a view which was only too widespread in western public opinion. This attitude was still held by other political leaders

in Europe and around the world in various ways until just a few days ago. Hospitals which can perform extraordinary and innovative healthcare procedures such as multiple organ transplants and highly advanced cancer therapy have proven to be very fragile, and are on the brink of collapse because of a viral epidemic which could have been contained much more effectively by keeping it as far from hospitals as possible. Here in Bergamo at least, hospitals have been, despite all their efforts, hotspots for spreading the epidemic.



### **What is your opinion of the measures taken at European level?**

I am with those who feel that at this time the European Union and its institutions have achieved a great deal, albeit with difficulty and inevitable contradictions: from complex decision-making mechanisms to a tendency for the Member States to look only to their own interests. It seems to me that in the course of a month, the European Commission and the European Parliament have taken important decisions and are implementing unprecedented economic measures. What is becoming clear is that however fundamental the economy may be and however important the role played by these economic measures both in dealing with the crisis and in striving to get things going again as soon as the crisis is under control, Europe still lacks the ability to intervene via tools, resources and powers in sectors other than regulating the market and the economy.

### **So do we need a more united Europe?**

It seems clear that we have even greater need of Europe. It's as if one day we woke up seriously ill and someone could only help us by giving us money and the freedom to run off to hospital, but was totally unable to take a direct role in caring for and protecting us. We all know that money is important for healthcare – but if someone gives you money and you're in the middle of a desert, money alone won't save you. I believe that the vast crisis caused by the epidemic is telling us that if we really want a European Union, we have to go much further with the single market and banking and monetary union to have a chance at a union of states which are able to deliver coordinated, unitary continental policies.

### **How can we all contribute and what sort of help is needed?**

We can invest in building up the ideal of a united Europe by promoting the culture of solidarity and integration and trying to stand firm against self-interest and closed doors. It is becoming increasingly obvious that no one can save themselves acting alone and that the dramatic alternative to solidarity and reciprocal and mutual sharing in a community of humankind and Europe will be a degrading and despairing fall towards the hell of more wars.

### **Have you seen any solidarity towards Italy?**

We have experienced considerable solidarity from social networks such as social economy organisations, and friends and institutions from many countries have expressed great concern and support. I have also received precious messages of support from colleagues at the EESC. Regrettably, there have also been some disparaging remarks from European politicians who have lost no time criticising Italy and carrying forward egotistical and obtuse policies not least with regard to the potential role of the European Union. Unfortunately, this is no different from what many Italian politicians are doing, capable only of carping and using this crisis to make political capital and whip up support among a frightened and confused populace. So I would say that even in this situation we have Europe and people who want to help others and stand firm and build, and then we have jackals and opportunists trying to make a profit from crisis and war.



Adam Rogalewski:

# "Coronavirus will change our societies for the better"

The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) will profoundly change our lives and will also change our countries, economies and societies. It has already made us realise how vulnerable we are despite the enormous improvements in our living conditions over the years, and technological progress, including digitalisation and artificial intelligence. We have also learnt, by staying isolated in our homes, just how important other people and society are to our daily lives. The coronavirus crisis very clearly invalidates the neo-liberal narrative that there is no such thing as society. At times of crisis like the one we are now witnessing, it is society, or in other words, people's solidarity, that can protect us from the effects of the virus.

The pandemic has changed our perspective on work. We have realised that some workers and professions that were previously perceived as being less important are in fact crucial for the functioning of our economies. These include not just health workers, who are putting their lives at risk and working round the clock to provide care, and care workers looking after the elderly, but also so-called less qualified grocery store workers, drivers, cleaners and agricultural workers, who provide us with essential goods and services. Many of these are migrants who have been perceived as a burden on societies and used as scapegoats in many countries and by many populist parties. Yet we have learnt that, without them, our societies would not be able to tackle the pandemic.

The coronavirus outbreak has eliminated differences between typical, atypical and self-employed workers. We have come to understand that all type of work is essential and all workers, even micro-entrepreneurs, contribute to our economies and equally need state support.

And it is this intervention from the state, which is able to protect workers and entrepreneurs, that plays a key role in tackling the pandemic. More than ever we need a strong and democratically controlled state that can deliver public services and protect the economy. The emphasis should be on a democratically controlled state and its government to avoid a situation like the one in Hungary, where recently adopted measures establishing a state of emergency cannot guarantee that the basic principles of democracy will be upheld. The crisis has also demonstrated the social partners' essential role in developing policies that tackle the coronavirus outbreak. Sadly, in my own country, MPs seemed to forget this when they recently adopted an act introducing regulations that are not related to the pandemic but that are aimed at restricting the role of social dialogue and the independence of the social partners.

The coronavirus crisis has made the EU more responsive to the public's needs. For example, the Commission recently proposed an instrument worth EUR 100 billion to support short-term work arrangements and mitigate unemployment risks (SURE). There is, however, a danger that the individual interests of Member States will prevail over EU solidarity. This is of particular importance for the countries with less advanced economies and social safety nets, which will require more economic support.

As shown above, the coronavirus outbreak has allowed us to reassess our societies, economies and the EU institutions, something which otherwise would not have been possible. We have recognised the importance of every worker, even those perceived to be less qualified, the importance of society

as opposed to neo-liberal individualistic ideologies, the importance of investing in the public sector and, finally, the crucial role of democracy and social dialogue. I firmly believe that we will not forget the lessons learnt in this crisis and that we will build a better future after coronavirus, a future that makes Europe and the world a better place for everyone.



Helena De Felipe Lehtonen:

## “SMEs at the heart of EU initiatives”

SMEs are facing numerous challenges in this time of COVID-19, including fierce competition, the unbridled growth of the collaborative economy, a lack of funding and excessive administrative burdens.

The new SME strategy must be seen as an opportunity for the EU to affirm its overall commitment to businesses, to reward entrepreneurs' commitment and the risks they take to help create jobs and foster talent and innovation. Twelve years have passed since the adoption of the European Small Business Act and the EU must place SMEs at the heart of its initiatives, to help us emerge from this crisis more rapidly and in a more solvent position.

European funds should not only cater to innovative SMEs or start-ups; there are a multitude of traditional SMEs that form the backbone of business and which must be taken into account when the different European and national funds are distributed.

Smart regulation is vital in any new proposal that entails the elimination of an existing one in the same field, in a “one in, one out” approach. Yet at the same time, the rules in force should be reviewed from time to time to ensure that the new rules do not undermine those in place or render them obsolete. The systematic use of “SME tests” to verify the impact of new initiatives must become the norm everywhere.

It is absolutely crucial that European trade policies incorporate the principle of reciprocity. We must place greater emphasis on unfair competition from non-EU countries and eliminate social and environmental dumping.



Lastly, the appointment of an EU High Representative for SMEs to lead the SME Envoys network is an innovative step, although it would require the creation of an entrepreneurs' advisory group, appointed by national SME representative organisations, to ensure that business strategies are closely aligned with the current situation facing European businesses.

Gonçalo Lobo Xavier:

# “I’ll never again miss an opportunity to give someone a hug”

The unimaginable has happened. Suddenly everything has changed and nothing seems to be the way it was. We are living in exceptional circumstances and we have to be resilient so that we can respond appropriately and come back strongly.

I don’t know what I miss most. Selfishly, we feel like we’re missing everything: freedom, goods, services, mobility, friendship, affection, hugs – the list is endless. We had everything and didn’t know it. We have to learn from this challenge.

In just over four decades of life, I have never experienced anything like this before.

This really is a different kind of “war”. As a Portuguese poet said, “this is a war where hugs are the weapons”, referring to the fact that we cannot touch each other without risking contamination. It is a sad irony when a display of affection can literally kill us.

In 1755, there was a great earthquake in Lisbon that almost completely destroyed the city. Marquis de Pombal, a minister in the kingdom at the time, made a famous comment: “we must bury the dead and care for the living”. This statement may be too cold by today’s standards, but it makes us feel that we must carry on with our lives and face this challenge – to which we feel we have contributed nothing – with courage, even if we are in despair.

But I now want to talk about a response. After two months of suffering and lockdown, after weeks of uncertainty and pain, it is now time to take care of the living and try to rebuild society, the economy, Europe and the world.

And on that basis, let’s learn the right lessons and start again. Many will think as I do: I will never again miss an opportunity to give someone a hug or tell them how much I miss them. I will never try to disappoint anyone again. These are all good intentions.

On a more practical note, no one was or could be prepared for something like this. How can we fix this? How can we rebuild society and the economy that sustains it?

We all need to answer these questions quickly, on the basis of the European principles of solidarity.

In fact, if we think about what we have been deprived of, we think about the European single market. In my opinion, the comparison makes sense: suddenly we have been left without a network, without a life. We have been deprived of freedom and the free movement of goods, services and people, and we have all been confined to the area we live in. Nobody has enjoyed it.



This is also why I’m a staunch Europhile. The single market brings us freedom, growth, free movement and solidarity. Let’s not allow the pandemic to deprive us of a better future. Let’s advocate a free, solidarity-based Europe. Together, let’s move towards a better future, where we hug those we love most and care for others.

Anne Demelenne:

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# “Pandemic demonstrates our system’s fragility”

My husband and I have very calmly spent the lockdown at home. My husband is part of the high-risk group and we have taken every precaution.

Right from the start of the pandemic, we have worn masks and gloves and have always kept the correct distance. We wanted to avoid taking major risks and also protect the public interest and the interests of healthcare staff and workers on the front line.

It’s clear that, in Belgium, we were not prepared. There has been a lack of transparency, which will need to be investigated later, but also a shortage of masks, tests for the public, and so on. I don’t know what has been happening in other countries – we only know what the media publish – but in Belgium, the situation has been particularly bad in care homes. Once the crisis is over, parliamentary inquiries will need to be held to identify the source of the problem.

Civil society continues to have a key role to play during the pandemic by making sure democracy is preserved. At operational level, people in Belgium who have lost their jobs are temporarily unemployed under a benefit system that was already weakened due to the austerity measures imposed by the EU. During the crisis, we have seen solidarity between people but not between EU Member States.

The pandemic has demonstrated our system’s fragility. We need to consider this an opportunity to move towards a system that better respects human beings, social rights and the environment.





Cillian Lohan:

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# "The essential is invisible to the eye"

I sit in my farmhouse by the sea. I have a good internet connection despite my rural isolated location. Each morning I feel lucky to be able to walk along the coastline, looking out to sea, knowing the next piece of land across the Atlantic is New York, almost 5000 kilometers away. I feel the great privilege of my comfort.

I can magically turn the cold morning air into a warm embrace. Everything is relative. I take a short swim in the sharp, salty Atlantic waves and when I run out of the sea the sand and stones feel hot beneath my feet. At extremes, it's hard to tell the difference between burning and freezing.



Throughout the week I wonder why I don't have more free time. Suddenly I am not doing my usual hours and hours of travel and commuting. I realise that I have filled that time by reducing my pace. I notice the number of people I speak to online who acknowledge the awful strains and consequences of the virus, but who express appreciation for their own situation.

Like in the Saint-Exupéry classic, the Little Prince reminds us that grown-ups are unable to perceive what is important in life. Perhaps this lockdown, this pause in our normally relentless lives, has given us all a chance to reconsider what is important and what is not. From every crisis comes a lesson and an opportunity to rebuild.

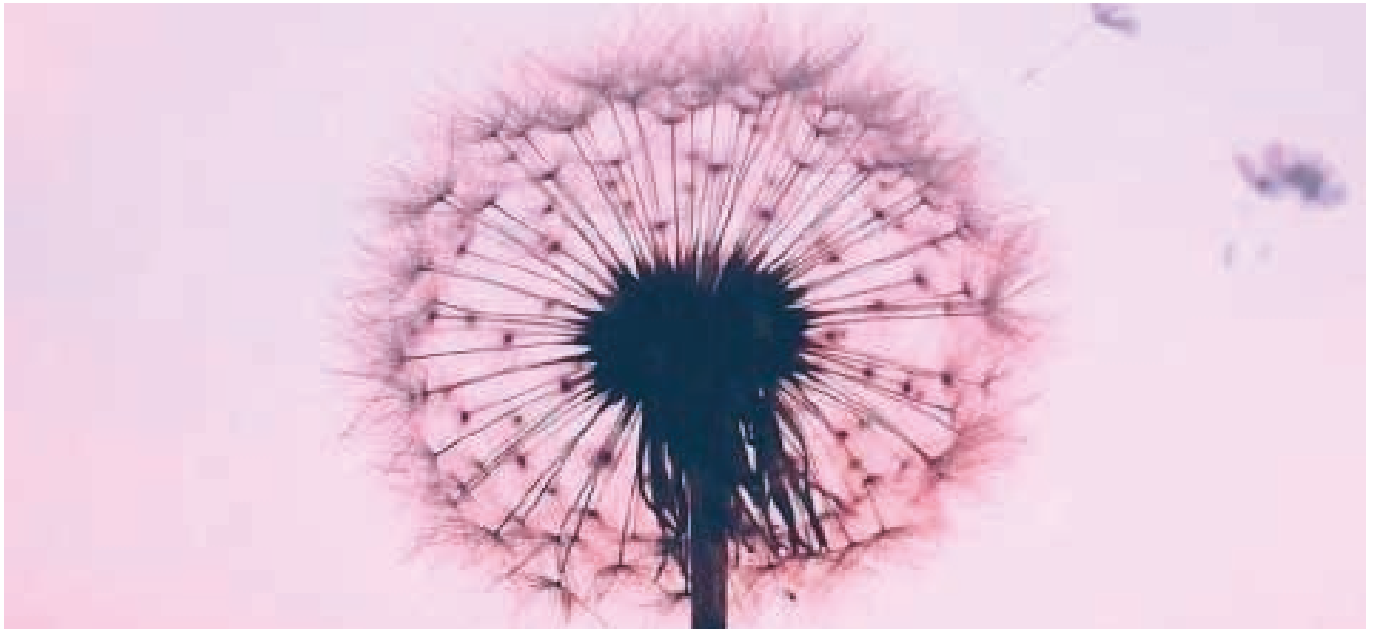
I settle into my day, focussing on Sustainable Development, focussing on Circular Economy, focusing on a Green Recovery. I am hopeful that we have had a collective change in perception. We now know which jobs and people are essential workers. It is interesting to notice how we value them, and the ways we have not been valuing them. It is uplifting to see how as a species we can work together, behave collectively for a greater good. Together we are acting at personal expense to protect the lives of other vulnerable groups.

We are also seeing the sad consequences of not listening to the evidence, and of postponing action.

I go to bed early and sleep well.

Christa Schweng: \_\_\_\_\_

# "My personal corona lessons"



When on 13 March – a Friday, by the way - our government decided to lock down the country as of Monday the 16th, the whole atmosphere in Vienna changed: walking around the usual places those last days felt strange, as everybody was looking at other people suspiciously.

My work changed dramatically with the lockdown: the Austrian social partners had swiftly negotiated a new short-time work scheme for the Covid crisis, which triggered an avalanche of questions from enterprises. As I specialise in European social affairs, I suddenly found myself answering tricky questions on short-time work in Austria.

I was aware that my answer would contribute to a business's decision on whether it paid off to do short-time work or whether the scheme was not affordable and employees needed to be laid off immediately - and this gave me some sleepless nights.

I thought a lot about the employers who needed to take difficult decisions and their employees who feared for their jobs. I thought about parents with children in primary schools

who had to replace teachers for weeks and about families who did not have the necessary technical equipment children needed for home-schooling. I thought about people living alone with nobody to talk to about their fears. And I felt sorry for my teenage daughter who missed meeting her friends.

Working from home was not new to me, as I had been teleworking for many years. I realised that many people had issues with working from home, either because of lack of equipment, space, tranquillity or contacts with their colleagues.

Will Covid-19 change our lives in the long term? I do not know, but for me there are a few lessons to take away:

- Working from home is as productive as working in the office
- A three-hour meeting in Brussels can also be held online
- Living with loved ones is a blessing - even more during times of lockdown
- Skype meetings are a poor substitute for talking to your parents and friends: meeting them face to face is invaluable

Georges Dassis:

# “No matter how strong we are, we cannot deal with future threats alone”

When I returned from Brussels on 11 March 2020, I had no idea I was going to experience a truly extraordinary situation.

It started with a strong recommendation from EODY (the Greek national public health organisation): anyone returning from abroad should self-isolate at home for 14 days.

At first, I told myself that, in the course of my life, I had emerged unscathed from a fair few difficult situations but, this time, under gentle pressure from my wife and children, and also out of a sense of civic duty towards others, I cancelled all my plans for the two weeks following 11 March.

In the meantime, coronavirus (COVID-19) was taking its toll on Lombardy and the first victims were being announced in other countries, including Belgium, France and Spain.

In Greece, the government imposed a general lockdown from 16 March. So there I was, stuck at home – along with some 10.5 million others – while healthcare workers fought relentlessly to save people suffering from coronavirus.

The lockdown, which almost everyone respected, produced very satisfactory results, as Greece has weathered the health crisis better than most countries.

The emerging economic and social crisis, however, is another matter entirely, since all economic and manufacturing activities were completely shut down. A very partial restart of the economy may have begun on 3 May, but workers and businesses in the tourism sector have been hit particularly hard by the crisis.

Ancient Greek philosophers used to say that every bad situation has some good aspect to it (οὐδὲν κακὸν ἀμιγές καλοῦ) and this maxim has proven true in my case. Never before in my adult life have I had so much time to enjoy my family life. I have also read some books from the large pile that keeps building up for when I retire from socioeconomic activities.

With the help of my wife, I've done all sorts of repairs and painting work around the house – some of which will have to be checked by a professional once the lockdown is over. I've taken care of my olive trees and I've had plenty of time to contemplate the situation.

In short, as you can see, the lockdown hasn't been a bad experience for me, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought



about all those who have been stuck in flats – large or small – that they can only leave to buy provisions or go for a short walk with authorisation requested by text message. Or all those in Greece and elsewhere who have lost loved ones. Or the workers who have lost their jobs and now don't have enough money to live on.

In an inclusive society and a union with solidarity as one of its cornerstones, you would expect those hit hardest by the pandemic to benefit from this solidarity, but this theory has not been fully translated into practice.

The countries that are, or think they are, economically and financially strong rejected the idea of issuing “eurobonds”, which would have been an effective response to the crisis while also being in keeping with the philosophy underpinning the EU treaties.

However, it should be noted that the European Commission responded much more swiftly to the pandemic and the ensuing health and economic crisis than it did to the 2009 financial crisis than impoverished tens of millions of people.

Let's hope and, above all, take steps to ensure – in whatever way we can – that everyone, particularly the highest-level political decision-makers, learns the lessons from this pandemic. That we stop wasting natural resources and thereby endangering our children's future. That those who were struggling before the pandemic are not even worse off after the resulting economic crisis.

That we understand that no one is invulnerable.

That we realise that, no matter how strong we are, we cannot deal with future threats alone and that, together, we will without doubt be strong enough to handle any situation that could endanger our health and our existence.

Baiba Miltovica:

# "Consumers face to the COVID-19"



The coronavirus is one of the greatest challenges the European Union has ever faced. The spread of the virus will further hit the EU Member States' economies resulting in major threats not only for businesses and employment but also for consumers. This has prompted governments to implement exceptional measures to protect people.

The Latvian government acted fast when the first positive cases of COVID-19 appeared and introduced widespread measures to contain the virus. Latvians didn't face strict lockdown measures like people in other EU countries, but were careful about general safety measures like social distancing requirements, carrying out disinfection, closing shopping centres on weekends and holidays, keeping a two-metre distancing rule for physical social interactions and gatherings indoors and outdoors, etc., and people respected these rules.

In an interview with The Telegraph, prime minister Karins explained how he struck a balance between "keeping people healthy" and "doing the least amount of damage possible" to the economy.

We still have to be careful since the number of coronavirus infection cases is high in Europe. As long as there is no immunity against the virus, there will be a threat of a repeat outbreak. On top of that, as long as there are active locations where outbreaks of this disease are found, there will be a risk of it spreading again. It is impossible to predict for how long it will be necessary to maintain safety measures, but it is clear that the situation we are experiencing affects people's mental health, psychology and attitudes.

Civil society consumer organisations have already indicated that consumer behaviours and purchasing habits are changing. People are living differently, buying differently and, in many ways, thinking differently. Consumers are deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19, from both the health and economic perspectives and as a result, are currently centered on the most basic needs.

Consumers are shopping more consciously, buying local products on the one hand and embracing digital commerce on the other. The shopping landscape is changing, bringing a more advanced online offer. Many of these new ways will remain post-COVID-19. Therefore civil society consumer organisations must investigate and understand these new realities and trends and offer people appropriate protection.

Enhancing consumer trust remains a cornerstone for digital commerce in the marketplace. Information disclosures, payment protection, unsafe products, dispute resolution, enforcement and education are only some of the issues consumer organisations will further work on and follow closely.

The Latvian National Association for Consumer Protection remains committed to supporting governments and municipalities as they take steps to protect vulnerable consumers from COVID-19. While this crisis lasts, solidarity and coordination with civil society organisations are what we need.

As well as the efforts of national civil society organisations, in the post-COVID-19 era we will need a strong and stable EESC whose members are knowledgeable and ready to work to fully represent the interests of civil society organisations.



Maurizio Reale: \_\_\_\_\_

## “Thank you” to the farmers

During the lockdown I experienced shifts in my state of mind. Initially, I was deeply concerned about the ravages of the pandemic in my country. And then a few weeks later, as the coronavirus hit the rest of the European Union, I found myself reflecting on how best to tackle this dramatic situation, one that I would never have dreamt I would have to live through in my lifetime.

As the days passed, seeing how many people were affected by the virus and how many lives were lost, I started to wonder why we were not equipped with a genuinely common health policy. The unbelievable difficulties encountered by the EU in terms of coordination, compounded by the lack of solidarity, confirmed my thoughts.

Over the coming weeks we will see whether the Member States can manage to put aside selfish nationalism and, in the common interest, propose vital solutions to address the very real social and economic needs confronting people and businesses in the EU. We have to come up with practical measures for those who have lost, or are at risk of losing, their jobs.

The immensely difficult situation has also highlighted the strategic importance of many professions: the doctors and nurses, the forces of law and order, the civil protection agencies, and the farmers and agri-food supply chain that made sure we never lacked for anything as essential as food, as was regrettably the case with masks, swabs and personal protective equipment in hospitals and other local settings.

Looking more closely at my own feelings during the days of lockdown, I have to say that I missed my family, the interpersonal relations that are central to my work, and my friends. But I also had the chance to reflect on the values that really matter in life, values which I have often neglected, and to appreciate how important they are. When our lives get back to “normal”, my first thoughts will go to the people who are closest to me, whether family or friends.



As well as having major economic repercussions, however, the pandemic will shape our individual quality of life; we will therefore have to seek a better, more sustainable way of living as we adapt to the new reality. We owe this to ourselves, but even more to all those who, because of the coronavirus, are no longer with us. It is right and fitting for my final thoughts to go to them.

Lucie Studničná :

# "The explosion of solidarity makes me cry"

My experience over the past few weeks – much like everybody else's – has been unique and very enriching.

On March 11, I returned from Brussels late at night feeling very tired. It was clear we would not be travelling in the following days because of the unknown threats posed by COVID-19, and I was happy about the unexpected opportunity to spend some quiet days in my office. But things took a different turn.

One of my daughters asked if she could stay with her husband and her three small children at our weekend house in South Bohemia (a place in the middle of nowhere, even the farm road ends there) for a few weeks. Her husband's company had gone into lockdown and he would be working from home for the next three months. I was glad they could stay in a safe environment and joined them together with my husband. We had planned to stay just for the weekend to help with post-winter maintenance, but ended up staying seven weeks.



Later, my second daughter joined us with her small son for some time.

With five adults, three of them working from home, and four children, life in a small house with one heated room and three cold bedrooms was not always easy. In the course of these long, intense but in a way slow days I made the following discoveries, which seem important to me:

- The most essential part of your work outfit when working from home is warm socks.
- From one day to the next we got very digital, and it worked;
- If you cook goulash on a wood stove for some five hours it tastes fantastic;
- It is very difficult if not impossible to find work-life balance and to disconnect in such challenging times, we need to work on it;
- It is fun to organize virtual drinks;
- Trade unions have a lot of work now and they are more important now than ever before;
- So many friends were calling and chatting just to be sure we were OK;
- Why do we need people to die in Europe to admit that joint European solutions could be a very good way forward?
- Virtual meetings can be a good plan B, but can never fully replace face-to-face get-togethers;
- It is useful to brush up your bedtime stories and nursery rhymes from time to time;
- In such critical moments the majority of people in my country need to show solidarity, humanity and togetherness, and this makes me cry.

Back in the office in mid-May it is more than clear that the hard work is only just starting – the health crisis is hopefully coming to an end and the economic one is taking over. Every day more people are losing their jobs and companies are closing. Apart from trying our best to kick-start the economy and to ensure working people get their wages and salaries, shouldn't we also work hard on a common, fairer future in Europe, where people live safely, in good health and in solidarity and have decent lives with a decent and fair income?

Carlos Trias Pintó:

# “This crisis is a stark warning that we need to overhaul the way we live”

At the beginning, my main concern was to bring my family all together again, as my eldest son was studying in the US. The family reunion was an inspirational moment.

The initial lockdown saw a return to family evenings, with films and games, although these were overshadowed by worry.

Madrid was, at that time, one of the worst affected cities in Europe; the healthcare system had collapsed and the lack of medical equipment meant that my medical friends had to wash their masks, as there were no spares; infection spread rapidly among them and their families. Even so, there was a real community spirit and at eight o'clock every evening, Madrid's balconies broke into applause.

The lockdown gave rise to a vibrant response and I was quickly recruited - once again by our dynamic VP Isabel Caño - to oversee the EESC's response to the European Alliance Against Coronavirus, which is managed in a generous, flexible and forward-looking way by the European Cluster Collaboration Platform.

This is an open and cross-cutting space, which generated the first responses from industry, drawing together the action of “makers” and really useful community proposals such as “Flatten the curve”. These combine with a more strategic function; the exploration of European ecosystems and the co-creation of solutions, from all of the three drivers that must permeate any future action: environment, digitalisation and resilience.

Today, society as a whole has to fully accept that this crisis is a very serious warning, that we need to overhaul the way we live, however much some people may wish to cling on to the past.

Let's forget about “business as usual”, intelligence suggests that we need to embrace models of cooperation, put in place all types of multi-stakeholder partnerships that help achieve this inclusive, social, human and ethical Europe, for which we have been striving for so long, after many strategies and policies that have always stalled before reaching completion.



But it is true that in the last three months we have made more progress than in the ten years following the Great Recession of 2008, which is very encouraging.

I am not at all happy with the institutional response of my own country, which has been plagued by political division and a lack of coordination. Instead, my hopes lie with the reaction of some of the EU's institutions, in particular the European Commission, the European Investment Bank and the European Central Bank. These are doing a brilliant job, because they have moved beyond navel-gazing and complacency. In short, they have stopped looking inwards and have learned that acting together and building alliances — from transparency and trust (and I stress that these two are indivisible) — are the building blocks of the future.

Let us follow their lead, on the course set by the European Green Deal and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The time to act is now!



Martina Širhalová: \_\_\_\_\_

# "Our shared goal has to be keeping as many jobs as possible"

Over the past few weeks I have been through more than I might have wished. I still have very mixed feelings and countless aspects of COVID-19 keep jostling for position in my mind, which is perhaps perfectly natural given the circumstances. I did not take the pandemic too seriously when it started.

I kept telling myself it was just a more serious kind of flu. When all the schools were shut on 10 March I still thought it would just be for a fortnight. I refused to believe anything different.

On 15 March, Slovakia declared a state of emergency. That is when I realised for certain that things were not going to be so simple. Measures were taken and we had to get on board with them.

You could only leave the house wearing a mask – and these were nowhere to be bought. The streets emptied and the theatres, cinemas and schools closed down.

Only food shops and chemist's were open. They had special arrangements in place that meant you could only have one person shopping in a 25m<sup>2</sup> area and you had to use sanitiser outside every shop entrance. Some shopping times were set aside for pensioners.

People coming back from abroad had to go into state quarantine. Behind the closed shops I could see the landlords, owners and staff who were not just frightened of the virus, but frightened for their jobs as well. On the one hand we were all frightened of being infected, on the other we were aware that some employers would not be able to cope with this situation and that jobs would be lost as a result.

This was one of the many problems we tackled at work. And we worked more than usual. Employers needed help in a number of areas. It was as if we were divided into those who were inundated with work and those who would have loved to work but were unable to.

From the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, our association pointed out the need for swift measures to help employers and entrepreneurs that would cushion the economic fallout of coronavirus. From the beginning, we were actively involved in commenting on the proposals put forward and we have also come up with a lot of our own.

We are trying to promote and support those proposals that seek to protect employment and the viability of firms. Our shared goal has to be keeping as many jobs as possible – all the more so because the threat of mass redundancies has never been so great and so real.



We consider it imperative that Slovakia have in place a highly effective social dialogue, backed at the national level by the tripartite configuration of workers, employers and government. Maintaining social harmony should be the goal of any government, and we believe that particularly in this difficult period it is very important to pursue a responsible and balanced policy towards employees and employers not only in every country but also at European level.



Judith Vorbach: \_\_\_\_\_

# “Dominance of the online world during the corona crisis”



I still remember very clearly the day when public life shut down: it was Friday the 13th of March. The mood on the streets of Linz was unusually tense. There was something in the air – and it wasn't long after that the lockdown began.

The whole situation was unreal. It felt as though we would be at home for a very long time, and we set to immediately and cleaned the whole house. While there was a feeling of danger everywhere and people were withdrawing from life outside, the virtual world was humming with activity: lots of funny posts were shared, probably to help cope with the situation.

The long telephone conversations with family and friends were dominated by one subject: coronavirus. Walking the dog was particularly important for me: without it I would have gone mad.

As the lovely weather was also drawing many others outside, I tried out new, less frequented paths so that I could keep enough distance from people. The sound of the trams, otherwise lost in the general traffic noise, was noticeable, as was the quietly flowing Danube.

Teleworking reminded me of my student years, when I also studied at home. What was new was the dominance of the online world. My calendar progressively filled up with online meetings, online events and even telephone dates. The volume of e-mails, already considerable, swelled even more, while the number of reasons to hold a teleconference kept growing. My professional interactions with people hundreds of kilometres away were just as lively as those with neighbours living in the next street.

Austria's lockdown has been relaxed in stages from the end of May, with some fits and starts. There was often uncertainty about what actually was or would be allowed. The return to the world «outside» at first took some getting used to, especially since many things were different now. It was a world of sanitiser and social distancing, of masks and visors. But my feeling above all has been happiness that physical encounters with people are now possible again.

Lidija Pavić-Rogošić:

# “When an earthquake strikes in the middle of a pandemic”



Three months have passed since the lockdown was brought in. Cities are now starting to reopen, and it is a good time to reflect on what has happened, as the rapidly spreading virus has touched upon all aspects of our personal and community life.

Three months ago, everything was normal. I worked in my office and travelled regularly to Brussels. After the outbreak of the pandemic, flights were suddenly cancelled and new policies on COVID-19 were updated every day. That brought changes in both my professional and private life.

My organisation had to cancel or postpone several events that had already been prepared, and in mid-March we started to work from home. Although this change of plan was distressing for all of us, we decided to use this time to develop some new ideas for projects and build some new partnerships by using online tools. We organised some online events and prepared some teaching tools on sustainable development for remote schooling.

But our biggest fear remains how civil society organisations will survive, as there is less money for our work. The Croatian government has introduced certain measures to support job preservation, but civil society organisations have been excluded.

In my private life, I was unlucky to have to spend the quarantine without my husband, who was unable to return home from abroad and had no choice but to stay far away, separated from our family for more than 90 days, sharing the fate of many Europeans.

Just when we thought that things could not get any worse, on Sunday, 22 March at 6:24 a.m., a terrible earthquake woke us up in Zagreb. First there was panic, then shock and after that, fear and uncertainty. Zagreb's historic centre was hit hard, reconstruction and repairs of buildings and infrastructure will be a complex and lengthy process.

We survived that, too. It is important to mention that we have demonstrated and proven that we cannot do without one another, without solidarity and volunteers, nor without strong public health systems that we have to preserve and make even stronger.

So, is there something positive? There are some specific changes that I would like to keep. I have started to practice the Feldenkrais Method via Zoom and I have also started to cook regularly.

It is a privilege to be able to work from home, no longer having to commute to work, have more sleep and less stress. But millions who have been pushed out of the workforce wish they could be working more, not less.

I would say that my hometown is now a COVID-19-free zone. I hope the events of 2020 will teach us to value our freedom more, and to appreciate the happiness of having a normal life, with its routines and everyday things. Of course, I also hope that 2020 will mark a turning point when unjust, destructive and inhumane systems begin to be transformed.

Arnold Puech d'Alissac:

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## "We've lost all our restaurant-owner clients, but farm sales have doubled"

Journalists explained to the French people that as the lockdown spread across the European Union, France had to get ready.

My farm wasn't affected – we had to carry on working, with distancing measures, so we could supply all our clients. It was when I was making deliveries to them that I saw for myself that the streets were empty, parking spaces were unoccupied and people were really applying the distancing rules – only one person at a time in shops, keeping a distance while queuing: all the pictures we saw from Italy had set a good example for French consumers to follow.



We've lost all our restaurant-owner clients, but farm sales have doubled and butcher shop sales have risen by 50%. We have actually sold more than usual. These are products that take several months to develop, meaning that we operate on a just-in-time basis and it's only now that we're returning to normal consumption compared to our level of production.

I was very happy to be at home with some of my children, along with our employees, who were relieved to be able to work at a time when half of all French workers were part-unemployed.

Since I was on our farm round the clock, I worked physically as well as mentally, so I managed to shed a few kilos.

I felt a bit as if it was Christmas, with everyone there – we enjoyed being together. But it was only the immediate family, not the wider family group, and not seeing friends and giving them a hug – that was sad. It made me think about my colleagues who live far away and experience this distance from other people all year.

I discovered the joys of teleworking – both employers and employees were happy. My greatest concern is for the transport, hotel and catering and events sectors, for the office space market or the flax sector, everything to do with horses, cider production and so on – we have to keep on producing wealth.

José María Zufiaur:

## “Living with the lockdown”

My main concern over the last few months has been for the EU to deal with this crisis in a way that reflects its original project and its structure, which are based on certain values, a single market and a currency zone that includes most of its Member States.

I have also been hoping we would all finally realise that, as Aristotle pointed out, currency is fundamental to a collective sense of belonging.

I have spent many hours re-reading books on the EU's failed response to the 2008 crisis, analysing articles and proposals on the urgent need to provide a different kind of response to this devastating crisis; a response that is faster and, above all, more coherent and which sets out a long-term vision.



I have been discussing these ideas with friends and with the leaders of the trade union of which I am a member. We have to take this opportunity to break with the dogma of radical austerity that has now held sway for decades, and establish a genuine link between fiscal policy and monetary policy.

I have also been writing about something I believe to be essential: to ensure that in political and economic terms, the EU does not turn up late for the move towards a federal union - or misses out on it altogether. This constitutes my own small contribution to influencing matters in this direction.

Of course, I, like everyone else, I suppose, have read and thought about what the situation might be like once this initial fight against the pandemic is over. In the worst-case scenario, ending the lockdown could lead to inward-looking identity politics and authoritarian approaches, to a type of looming war, with everyone pitted against each other in the public sphere, just as neo-liberalism had already advocated for individuals. Alternatively, the end of the pandemic could lead to a form of a globalisation based on a sort of governance that is more multilateral, human and more socially just.

The crisis itself is undeniably highlighting the costs of a lack of democratic planning — not only in the healthcare sector, but also, among others, in industry — and an eroded awareness of the common good, as the result of an ideology, almost a religion, such as the neo-liberal one that has undermined the pillars of the social state. This crisis has quite clearly shown that all public goods, from healthcare to education and infrastructure, constitute the true wealth of nations, and that these need to be saved and safeguarded.



Yves Somville:

## “Lessons from the crisis”

As someone living in the countryside and mad about gardening, I have to confess that I have not suffered unduly from the lockdown, apart from no longer being able to see family and friends.

Personally, I would draw three lessons from this crisis. First of all, while the EU did eventually come up with budget measures to help the recovery, it was regrettable that there was a lack of consultation between the Member States on providing health equipment at the peak of the crisis, or on measures to be taken when easing the lockdown. A more joined-up approach would have shown the public the value of the EU.

The second lesson, based on what I experienced in my own country, is this: what I shall take from all this, rather than the manifest failure of some of those in charge of tackling the crisis in terms of communication and the provision of protective equipment, is the dedication throughout the emergency of large numbers of people – in the health sector, of course, but also elsewhere. In fact, it is the public services, much maligned by some on occasions, that have enabled the whole of our society to get through this crisis – not to mention the many manifestations of solidarity from the public itself.

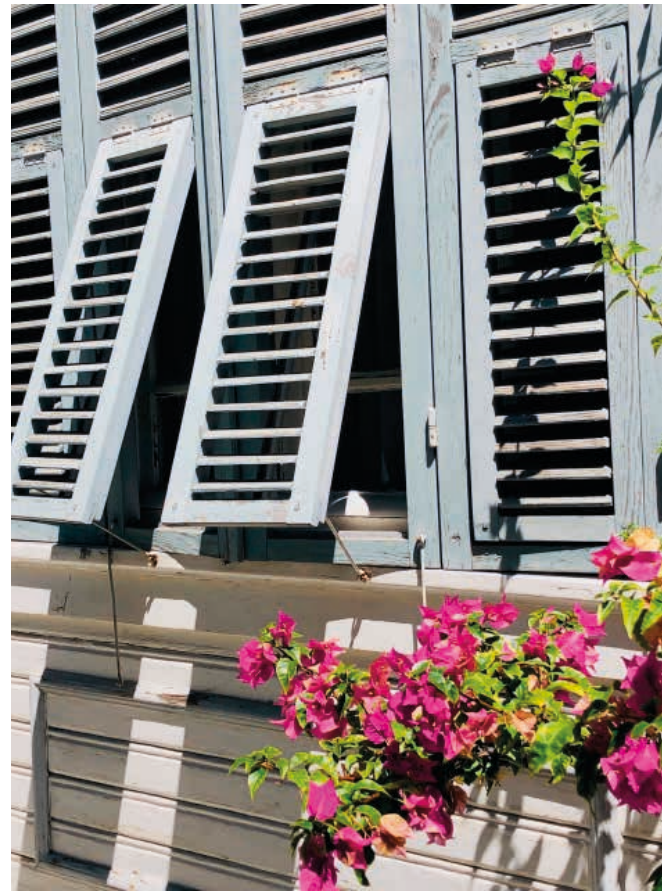
Finally, the third lesson, to my mind, is the fortitude and discipline that people are capable of when necessary. Of course, in this case it was health that was at stake, facing a little-understood virus for which there is no cure.

If there is one thing I would wish for, it would be that, just as we listened to the experts in tackling this health crisis, we would similarly follow what climate scientists and other experts have to say in managing the climate transition as we embark upon the recovery.

In agriculture, while there were good conditions for work in spring, the lockdown and the closing of businesses and the hospitality sector led to a slump in demand, squeezing the prices of some dairy products, such as milk, pigs, certain categories of livestock and, for Belgium in particular, potatoes as a result of the closure of processing plants – big exporters in normal times.

Horticulture has also suffered terribly not just from the lockdown but from the shortage of seasonal labour for fruit picking. However, farmers who opted for farmgate sales are one good news story.

Consumers really have turned back to locally produced food for both meat and dairy and fruit and vegetables. Let us hope this continues in the future!



# “Ensure that all Member States have equal access to vaccine therapies and diagnostic tests”

I didn't find it particularly difficult to stay at home during the lockdown. There were a number of things I'd been putting off doing for years. So I had the chance to get down to them and was glad to be able to sort them out. The family photos and mementoes that I'd collected from our parents' houses were all mixed up, so I sorted through them. Putting them in order like this was very emotional. I kept myself busy with activities I'd missed, such as handicrafts, baking, cooking, making traditional Greek liqueurs, jams and preserves - things I don't normally have the time for when I'm trying to keep up with the hectic demands of my job.

On the other hand, I have to say that I really missed the children because they don't live with us. Our younger son would pass by beneath the balcony so we could see each other from a distance, which was hard and brought home how much we were missing out on. I stayed in touch online with my son in England. But we felt the need to contact each other, even though only online, more often than before.

I have the feeling that we gradually began to remember some of the values we had forgotten, such as showing solidarity, saying hello to the people who live next door but who we would forget to greet, smiling from the balcony to someone passing by on the street below. With the pandemic, feelings we had actually forgotten about resurfaced. We had forgotten to feel gratitude. We had been taking our health for granted. In 2020, we could never have imagined that a virus would do so much harm, that it would take loved ones away from us, that in a neighbouring country there would be such a high death rate, so many human lives lost. It all makes you think a bit differently, take a closer look at your basic life values.

The pandemic has thankfully also made us realise the overriding importance of science in our lives. We need to start a discussion to see which countries have been the most affected and why, looking into the role of populism and conspiracy theories, not to mention the anti-vaccination movement, in these countries. The acceptance of and trust in

science on the part of politicians and the public has protected some countries, such as Greece. I think we also need to start a discussion about the role of the church, the media and prominent public figures during the pandemic.

It is very significant that in all countries the value of national health systems emerged, since more recently, in the wake of globalisation and society's emphasis on ways of generating wealth, we have woken up to the fact that some services cannot be delivered under a profits-based approach. We had neglected national health systems and came to understand how they need to operate, not just in the event of a pandemic, but always. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those who were on the front line in spite of all the difficulties facing national health systems.

I would like to add a few words on the subject of consumers. Unfortunately in many Member States, due to the pandemic, there was a deterioration in standards of consumer protection, especially for passengers/travellers. Although the relevant EU Commissioner issued a recommendation to Member States not to suspend legislation protecting consumers in respect of flights, package tours and transport, many Member States unfortunately went ahead with the suspension. So instead of being able to get our money back when we cancel tickets, they are giving us vouchers - valid for 12 to 18 months - which are not even guaranteed in the event of the company we are travelling with filing for bankruptcy. If we do not use the vouchers within the time limit, then we will be able to get our money back. This amounts to interest-free borrowing on the part of the travel companies at the expense of consumers, who have also been affected by the pandemic. I know of people who do not need their vouchers as there is no way they will be using them in the next 12 to 18 months (e.g. school trips for children who finish secondary school this year). And yet for 12 to 18 months, the parents of these children will have provided an interest-free loan to anyone involved in organising these trips. It is unacceptable for consumer rights to be curtailed.



Moreover, as we are living in a digital era and have all been working from home, making much more use of the Internet, there have been many more cases of online fraud, as well as far more widespread dissemination of fake news, including alleged conspiracies.

What we do need, on the other hand, is to ensure that workers continue to enjoy their acquired rights when teleworking. One issue worth looking into is how teleworkers' performance is calculated, how it should be assessed, and in any event we need to examine working relations under teleworking conditions.

Another very important parameter that the EESC has started to use - one for which the EESC president, Luca Jahier, has already voiced his support on Twitter - is the proposal by the Greek prime minister calling for joint procurement on the part of the Member States of vaccines, therapeutics, medicines and diagnostic tests, so that no Member State is left without supplies that are vital for human life.

This is an initiative that needs to be taken up by the EESC as a whole, in the form of an own-initiative opinion, in order to be absolutely certain that all Member States have equal access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. I would like to say that it gave me great pleasure to present this proposal both to our president, Luca Jahier, and to the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), and both agreed to support it.

Tellervo Kylä-Harakka-Ruonala:

## “From the Winter War to poetry”

It was the 80th anniversary of the end of the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland. The national commemoration was cancelled due to coronavirus, but bells were ringing at 11 a.m. in all Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic churches across the country. I went outdoors to listen to their chimes and saw Helsinki almost desolate.

The Winter War lasted 105 days - and so did my self-isolation, which began on its anniversary. Even though I enjoy my own company, isolation was sometimes tough. I then asked myself: my parents coped with the appalling conditions of the war, my father fighting on the front at 30 degrees below zero and my mother at home alone with a new-born baby, what do I have to complain about?

Actually I was lucky, as I was able to go out at any time. And I made use of this opportunity by walking hundreds of kilometres - mainly along the coast.

My background organisation followed the situation in enterprises very closely and provided the government with proposals on how to save businesses and jobs. The short-term outlook was very gloomy, and the future is still blurry. But when company leaders began to plan the necessary measures to enable a responsible exit, a new hope started to emerge.

Together with colleagues, I prepared the proposals of the EESC's Employers' Group on tackling the coronavirus crisis: how to help European businesses survive and retain jobs, and how to boost the recovery of the EU economy. Thanks to digital tools, my work at the EESC continued almost normally despite the exceptional conditions. It was nice to see my library soon become one of the meeting points for my colleagues from all over the EU.

The lockdown also brought me something new at a personal level. I had the honour of becoming a remote muse and receiving poems – each more delightful than the last. I would like to share one of them with you to illustrate the spirit of encouragement and support that I hope we can all offer to each other:

I don't offer a weekday, I offer Sunday.

I don't offer everyday chores, subjects of big efforts.

I offer Sunday, with its high sky that carries over the everyday life.

(freely translated from Finnish to English)





Sofia Björnsson:

## “Farmer solidarity in Sweden”

I work for the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), and at the beginning of the pandemic we worked very hard to secure food supply.

At LRF we have a scheme for farmers in need. If a farmer falls ill, there are groups that can help take care of animals or deal with other practicalities during their illness. The scheme was quickly set up back in March.

LRF has also been helping businesses match job-seekers and farmers short of labour – for example, a vegetable producer offered to employ people from a nearby hotel that had closed, and there are many other examples. Thanks to initiatives like these, and the fact that many seasonal workers from other countries could come to Sweden, the farming and forestry sectors, which initially were short of staff, have now more or less secured the workforce they need.

Many farms, especially vegetable producers, have had to change crops this year, and forest producers have had to postpone certain activities. However, overall the agricultural sector (including horticulture) seems to have been less severely affected in Sweden than in many other European countries.

However, our organisation feels strongly that we need to extend our solidarity beyond the farming world, and one very practical thing we were able to do to help was donate plastic sheets from overhead projectors in our Stockholm office to make protective visors for health workers.

Personally, I feel very fortunate. No one close to me has fallen ill with COVID-19.

I can work from home just as well as I do from the office. I can hear some neighbours arguing in my building, and that makes me think about those who are less fortunate in this lockdown – people who have lost their jobs, children who have not been to school and have not had a school lunch for a long time, families living in small apartments with hardly any room to work or do homework.



But I miss my family, especially my parents, who are elderly. I miss doing ordinary things like meeting many people at the same time. And of course I miss the office and my colleagues.

In spite of all the pain, loss and disruption, I believe COVID-19 is teaching us lessons. Above all, I think it is teaching us to come to terms with uncertainty. We are very used to being able to plan our lives, but the pandemic, especially at the beginning, has forced us to change our habits. Now we have developed new habits, but we do not know how long this period of uncertainty will last.

When it's over, the first thing I want to do is meet my parents and in-laws. I have seen my parents for a socially distanced picnic in a park, but I am looking forward to spending time with them in real life, like in the good old days.

# "The crisis has shown us yet again that our futures are interconnected"

As I am writing this testimony, the gates of lockdown are timidly opening up and questions are starting to arise: what kind of world are we stepping into? What marks or scars will this epidemic leave on our economies, our societies and our lives? Have we learned anything? Will we do things differently?

As a Greek, seeing my country enter a new crisis just when Greece was starting to come out of a ten-year-long nightmare, I was distressed and felt it was an injustice. We had to face this new pandemic with a weakened healthcare system and economy due to the previous crisis. Today, I am proud to say that Greece handled the first phase swiftly, realistically and successfully. Everywhere there was solidarity and a sense of common purpose.

As representatives of enterprises, our first concern was saving lives. Businesses mobilised very fast and made important donations for the purchase of medical and clinical equipment. At the same time we had to organise work from a distance and keep workers safe in the workplace, examine measures to save companies and jobs, ease liquidity, keep the value chains in place and get organised for the next phase.

Decisions were taken by our government, but we knew that no one could face this asymmetric shock alone. Europe was more relevant than ever! Europe responded - «a bit late» some will say - but it did, and we can be proud as Europeans. I think this is, yet again, the first lesson to draw from this crisis: our futures are interconnected.

The second lesson, I believe, is that we must not abandon our efforts once the coronavirus threat is behind us, but must move on with European integration, especially given the developments between China and the USA. We need to continue along the path that we planned and designed during the previous crisis to achieve a deeper economic, financial, fiscal, green, social and political Europe. I am confident that this time we will persist in our efforts.

Thirdly, before this pandemic, I was always astonished by how much our societies underestimated, undervalued and underinvested in two essential areas of life: health and education. We are living with the consequences of this - people losing their lives and populism on the rise. It is therefore even more important today to create a stronger Europe in terms of health and education.

On a more personal note, during this crisis I had the time to read some philosophy and I would like to share with you a beautiful notion. Ancient Greeks believed in the «cosmos living in harmony». This was based on two values: αιδώς, respect for others and for all the elements - vegetal, animal and human - of our world, and δίκη, justice. Let's get inspired by this concept and create this «cosmos» for ourselves!



Tatjana Babrauskienė:

“If this quarantine has done anything, it’s given people time to recharge and think about how important our relationships are”



Tatjana Babrauskienė is a Lithuanian member of the EESC and of the Lithuanian Education and Science Trade Union. EESC Info has asked her to share her thoughts on COVID-19 as seen from her country.

#### How have you experienced the lockdown?

It has been a unique experience, involving a great deal of anxiety and waves of panic as headlines talked about a virus that was spreading globally like wildfire.

At the same time, it was like living in slow motion in a world where everything had changed overnight, leaving us with a new normal.

My organisation was flooded with emails from members and teachers who felt lost and needed support. We created a COVID-19 information webpage with recommendations, legal advice and other useful information, and a «Distance learning ideas» page with tips and tools for e-teaching and e-learning. All this kept us energised because we knew that many people relied and depended on us.

#### What did you miss during this difficult time?

Meeting with friends and colleagues and most of all with loved ones.

Take Easter, for instance. Traditionally, we spend Easter with our extended family. This year we painted eggs and cooked special dishes as usual, but there was no festive mood in our celebrations.

Thankfully, we were allowed to leave home for a walk or exercise, alone or with family members, and I used this opportunity widely.

#### What lessons can be learned from the lockdown?

During the quarantine we created new practices as we gravitated online. We will see whether they will become a regular way of

working and communicating, and if the frequency and duration of our meetings with co-workers and friends will change.

The lockdown has also partly been an educational experiment, testing how students perform with online teaching versus face-to-face classes. Unfortunately, it has also increased inequality, and it remains to be seen whether schools can return to the status quo after this crisis.

The digital shift has been shown to involve a risk of age discrimination, the spread of conspiracy theories and the growth of fake news as people try to find answers to the important questions: what is going on here, who is responsible and what are the reasons for it? On the other hand, technology today makes it possible to monitor everyone all the time. How could this impact our personal life? We should not be put in a position of having to choose between privacy and health.

The good news of the lockdown is that the halt to human activity is making a difference to climate change and that cutting carbon emissions and changing people’s attitudes could become more of a reality.

#### What hope is there for those whose jobs are threatened?

Workers have been unevenly affected by the lockdown. Those whose jobs were nonessential and/or couldn’t be performed from home faced the largest income losses and lost the most jobs.

Job insecurity and pay are correlated with education levels, so we need to reinforce our education and training systems and provide the necessary up-skilling and re-skilling for everyone in need. We must ensure that we come out of this crisis stronger and better prepared for the future, whatever it might be.

#### Are there any people you would like to see but haven’t been able to yet?

My foreign friends and colleagues. I can’t wait to meet them and work with them without worrying about masks, social distancing and hand sanitisers.

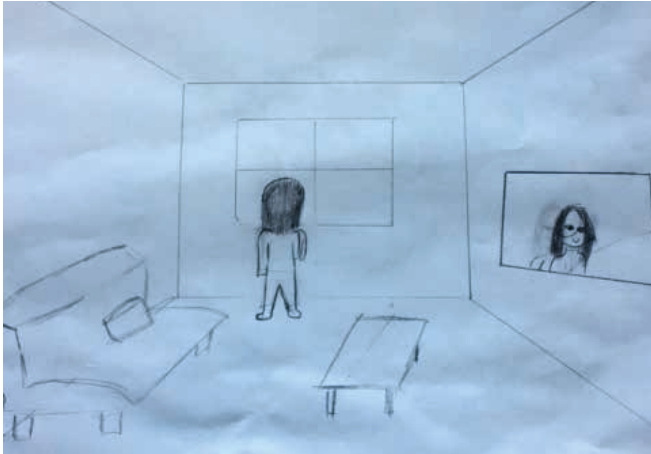
Lithuania has done a terrific job in not just flattening the curve, but downright squashing it. Our social life is back to (almost) normal. But in some countries the situation does not look so stable. I do hope things will get better soon for them.

If this quarantine has done anything, it’s given people time to recharge and think about how important our relationships are.

Reet Teder:

## "It's good to be back"

When the crisis started in the middle of March, the whole situation was truly unique and unbelievable. Almost everything was closed everywhere in Europe and nobody knew at that time if the lockdown was actually helping or not. Saving lives was the most important thing and the economy had to be sacrificed.



We saw Europe's four freedoms disappear overnight. The Single Market was almost gone. We saw one Member State block deliveries to another and buyers literally waiting outside face-mask factories in China to outbid one another.

In my country, Estonia, the situation was not too bad. The health system was able to cope, and not too many lives were lost to COVID-19 (69 altogether). At first, there was a shortage of masks and other protective equipment, but this was ultimately resolved. It was good to see how quickly some companies changed their production and started to manufacture the necessary equipment, while others helped with deliveries.

My family and I managed quite well. Living in our own house with a garden in a green area, we did not suffer too much. Of course, almost everything - shopping centres, schools, cinemas, theatres and sports facilities - was closed, but walking outside (keeping a distance!) was possible and even recommended.

It was remarkable to see the real boost of e-everything - from shopping to seminars to communication. Everything was suddenly done via the internet - including schooling. Overnight, teaching and learning went online. And the teachers and children did well. Everyone learned a lot during the crisis and it was so heartwarming to see how much my daughter missed real school.

At work, the legal team of my organisation, the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, provided a record number of consultations during this time. Acknowledgement of force majeure reached an all-time high. The economic situation is slowly improving, but some sectors are still facing great difficulties. I am afraid that this could be only the beginning and that in autumn, things may get worse. For the moment, government measures are helping a lot of people, but what will happen if these come to an end?

Difficult times like this make one think about and appreciate the lives we live and our freedom, in Europe and also at the Committee. It is indeed a real luxury to be able to travel, come to Brussels and have our debates. It is very important that we continue our work, so as to maintain a real link between different people in different EU countries, with or without crises.



Peter Schmidt: \_\_\_\_\_

# "We need to shift towards an economy of wellbeing"

German trade unionist Peter Schmidt gives us an insight into the challenges faced by trade unions in his country amid furloughs and dismissals on the one hand and essential workers putting their safety on the line on the other.

## **How are you experiencing this coronavirus crisis?**

I have the feeling that we are living in surreal times and discovering how vulnerable our societies and economies are.

## **What has this crisis meant for you and your organisation?**

For me as a trade unionist it is essential that we come together and communicate with one another. Freedom of association is a core element of our democracy. We are seeing how important this right is and realising that we will have to fight to preserve it in the future.

In some cases, where we had excellent relations with employers, we found ways to keep the social dialogue alive and we struck some very good win-win agreements. But in other cases both the workers and the companies lost out.

## **How did you experience the lockdown?**

The most striking thing for me was to see so much social solidarity between neighbours and friends. I was also struck by how the pace of society slowed down.

## **What did you miss most during this difficult time?**

Meeting friends and family, going to restaurants.

## **What lessons can be learned from the lockdown?**

That the most important people in our society are nurses, shop assistants, rubbish collectors, caretakers and so on, and yet that they have the lowest salaries. The virus has exposed our economic weakness, which is why we need a shift towards an economy of wellbeing.



## **What hope is there for those whose jobs are threatened?**

That the Member States have learned their lessons and will support them for much longer than their contracts cover them for.

## **Who are the first people you want to see when this is over?**

My mother. She is in a rest home that is still locked down.

Kinga Joó: \_\_\_\_\_

# “Families have the ability to strengthen society’s immune system”

On 10 March the EU-Serbia Joint Consultative Committee meeting in Brussels took place in a strange, heavy atmosphere. After the meeting everyone was in a hurry to get back on the road. I returned home knowing that major changes were about to hit Europe and with the feeling that this would be my last flight for a long time. In Hungary, during this period people’s main reactions were uncertainty and disbelief. For many Hungarians the severity of the situation became clear when the government announced that the celebrations planned for 15 March, our national day, would be cancelled.

Like many other European countries Hungary closed its borders and introduced a number of restrictive measures. Education moved to on-line classes, those who could work at home did so and silence reigned in the streets and in usually crowded areas. Although a state of emergency was swiftly declared, the country did not lock down completely. Public areas were not totally empty and there was no strict ban on people going out of their homes. Thus, where I live, our favourite ice cream parlour at the end of the road stayed open all the time, to my children’s great joy.

And how vital these sources of consolation were to our little heroes during this period of lockdown! At their level and to the extent of their ability, the children helped to protect our family well. Confined to barracks, they endeavoured to play quietly, gave up their birthday parties and sat in front of screens for hours on end (whereas previously we had been constantly telling them to limit their screen time). As well as children, the elderly were also widely condemned to isolation. In several places local authorities and civil society organisations did a good job of providing assistance to people isolating at home. However, in many cases this task fell to family members.

For my part, the lesson which I have learned from the past few weeks is how much more important the role of the family and family ties become in this kind of crisis. It is now clear that families have the ability to strengthen society’s immune system, but we have also realised how vulnerable they are and how much they need to be helped. In this respect, civil society organisations have a key role to play. In our association, it has also been interesting to note how, in addition to practical forms of help (such as gifts, logistical support and assistance with education), assistance was also needed in the area of mental health.



Philip von Brockdorff:

# "The pros and cons of life moving online"

The experience of the lockdown has been mixed, I would say. On the one hand, working from home has provided me with more time with my family than I've ever had. On the other, I've had to make arrangements to convert a room in my home into an office. Staying at home for long hours is frustrating at times, so I have tried to spend time on my favourite hobby: listening to music on my hi-fi system.

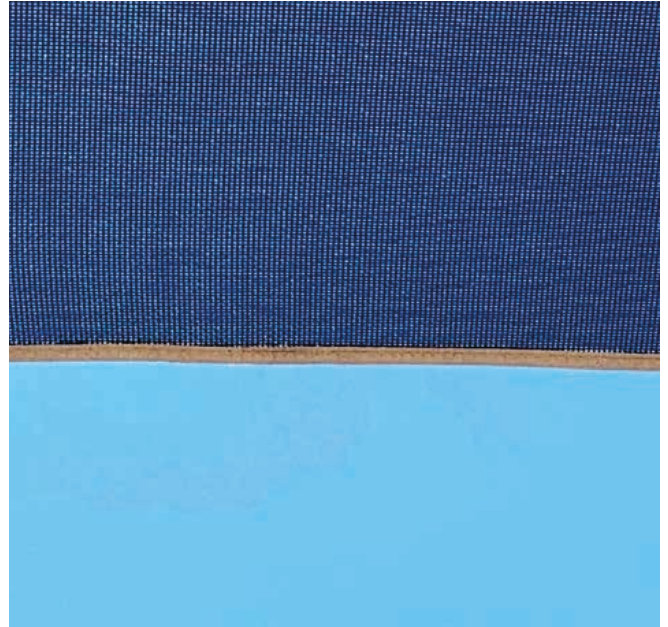
As a university teacher, I have missed interacting with students during lectures. Yes, I have interacted via Zoom or Panopto, but it's not the same as when you're in the classroom.

From an academic perspective, one lesson learnt is the capacity to interact with students online, and though I believe that being physically present in the classroom is a better teaching method, it is useful to consider blended learning as the way forward.

I have also participated in several online meetings, and they have been largely as effective as being physically present. A number of meetings could actually continue being held online, including some EESC meetings.

Beyond my personal experience, the lockdown has brought to light a number of realities: some economic activities were evidently non-sustainable and others not as resilient as we believed them to be. A re-think of economic activities is therefore both necessary and long overdue, and the sooner the better. But the effects of COVID-19 and the transition to a more resilient and sustainable economy are likely to be painful for many.

I have to say I've been one of the more fortunate ones, in that I could switch to online teaching and interacting with students via Zoom or Panopto within a week or so. My workload has probably increased, as I've not had to travel as before. I've also continued to meet colleagues at university and elsewhere online.



But I know many whose line of work has been disrupted or has stopped altogether. Many are still on state support, and that support is shrinking as it nears its end date. Many have also lost their jobs, and for them especially finding work will be much more difficult than they've ever experienced. Youth unemployment, including among graduates, is likely to increase and it will take at least a couple of years for economies to return to anywhere close to 2019 levels.

Being an academic, my first priority would be to resume attending conferences where I can meet colleagues and discuss economic topics of common interest. The next priority would be to start visiting the few audiophile friends I know here in Malta and sharing experiences and knowledge of audiophile systems.



Michalis Antoniou:

# “The experience and role of the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation during the COVID-19 pandemic”

In his address to the nation on March 15, the president of Cyprus announced preventive measures putting the country and large parts of the economy under lockdown. The message was that severe economic hardship was imminent and we all had to brace ourselves for the impact.



In the face of this unprecedented crisis, the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB) responded by suspending all non-essential services and focusing its resources and human capital on helping the government and businesses protect public health and the economy.

We put OEB into overdrive, establishing the federation from day one as the contact point for businesses. A Mon.-Sun. hotline was introduced offering guidance to businesses and we issued more than 175 circulars in real time, providing information and answering questions about healthcare protocols and the business support schemes put in place.

We also made 67 radio and 192 television appearances, of which 52 were on primetime news. In the same 4-month period, our executive committee convened 27 times (it usually sits about 10 times a year) and met 11 of our 14 cabinet ministers.

The business community rallied behind OEB's efforts, offering valuable insight into the problems the economy was facing. We are proud to say that we were directly involved in the framing of the national response strategy, our proposals forming a considerable part of the national COVID-19 exit plan.

This pandemic has been hard on everyone, most of all the tragic loss of human life. It has affected our interpersonal relationships, employment and the way we conduct business. We have been moved by the solidarity people and businesses have demonstrated, as well as by how well they complied with the restrictions imposed.

Although a force of destruction, COVID-19 has taught us a lot. We have learned that the state and the private sector can work together effectively in perilous times. We have learned that decisive intervention based on solid scientific evidence can bring positive results. We have also learned to think differently and adapt how we work, foregrounding the importance of a digital economy.

Unfortunately, this crisis will not leave our economy unscathed. But from what we have experienced so far, if we show the same resolve and decisiveness in the months ahead, we can put this crisis behind us with fewer losses than there might have been and return to normality sooner rather than later.



Gunta Anča:

# "A crisis is a fantastic opportunity to spot the weakest links"

Lockdown was a strange time of self-understanding. On the one hand, it was like a dream come true... to stay at home and have enough time to do all those things I'd always wanted to do, but didn't have time for. On the other, it made you realise how important socialisation is for people - to meet, talk, touch, see other human beings in reality and not on a screen. And how hard it is to live without all that.

This experience changes your values and makes you think in a different way. But it also shows new ways of working together. It is possible that after this crisis we will have more online meetings, which are much easier, but at the same time do not really allow us to create new ideas together and develop new forms of cooperation.

There are and will be many lessons for our society. I wouldn't be able to mention all of them, so maybe I will highlight just few in the field I know best - people with disabilities.

This crisis has shown how bad the situation is in long-term care centres. Many people with disabilities and many elderly people just died there and some countries did not even include these deaths in their coronavirus statistics. Five years ago, our Committee drew up an opinion on the deinstitutionalisation of care. There have been some changes since, but the crisis has shown how much we still have to do.

At the same time, we have been talking so much about support systems for the most vulnerable groups in society, but the crisis has shown that, despite all the support measures, people with disabilities were one of the first groups to lose their jobs.

A crisis is a fantastic opportunity to spot the weakest links in our support systems and now is the time to do our best to make them stronger.

The role of civil society organisations during this crisis has been and will continue to be very important, as they are the closest to all members of society. People from different groups need to be supported and civil society organisations are the best place for them to find that support.



These organisations are also best placed to know what kind of help people need, so it is incredibly important to involve them in the decision-making process.

As our experience in the field of disability has shown, there have been a great many different approaches. Some countries have included organisations of people with disabilities in governmental decision-making bodies (Italy), and some have given them the opportunity to express their views at a very high level (Spain), but in some others these organisations have just been forgotten (Latvia). And this reveals how much importance the governments of the different European countries attach to their different citizens.

Cristian Pîrvulescu: \_\_\_\_\_

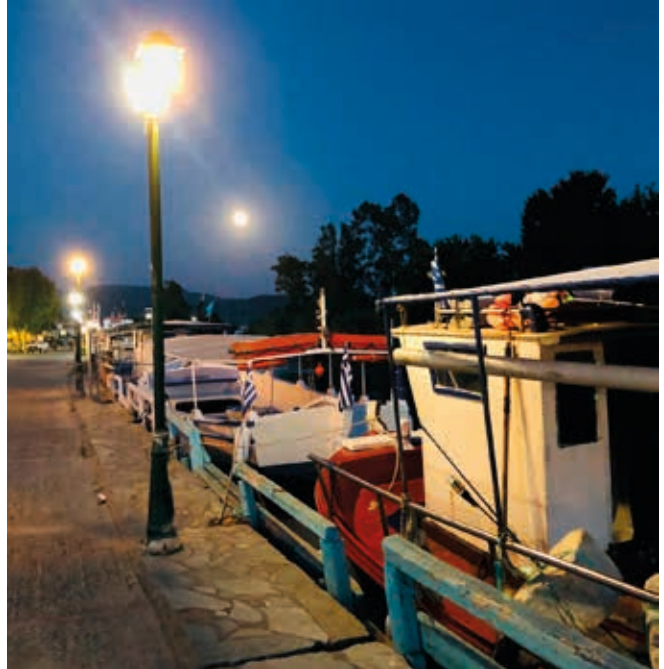
## “The confinement period? More work, more stress, less rest”

How was the two-month lockdown in Bucharest? Strange! On 15 March, Romania took its first measures. From 18 March, everyone had to stay at home. Before 15 March, this was only a recommendation, which few people followed, increasing the epidemiological risks. The mandatory lockdown lasted until 15 May, when the state of emergency was replaced by a state of alert. But this was no holiday! On the contrary, I worked harder, working online for more than 12 hours, and sometimes 16 hours a day: classes and activities on the university's platform, and taking part in TV programmes, interviews, meetings and webinars.

The lines between public and private life became blurred and the boundary between the two worlds quite simply disappeared. Moreover, things did not become easier at the end of this two-month period. Life has not gone back to normal and, as well as my online activity, I have other obligations requiring a physical presence. So my schedule has remained just as packed.

Even though I wasn't one of those who were permanently isolated in their own homes – I had limited freedom of movement in Bucharest – my ability to travel was considerably reduced. That was the hardest thing to bear during this period. This is perhaps why, symbolically, the first thing I did when the state of emergency ended on 15 May was to make an appointment to renew my passport. However, the successive steps to ease the lockdown have not fully restored freedom of movement.

Travelling abroad – for example to Brussels for EESC meetings – remains difficult and can be a risky business. Flights are cancelled from one day to the next and it is hard to predict what will happen. Life has changed, neither for better nor for worse, but it has certainly become different. And we will have to adapt. For a while anyway. And, once again, the most vulnerable will be the first to suffer.



# "Coronavirus: lessons learned"

In March 2020, we started to realise that the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a health crisis; it would influence many aspects of our lives. It was also clear for associations and activists that we would face new challenges in our ordinary work. As it turned out, the situation was even worse than we expected.

In May 2020, we organised a «virtual drink». After two months of the lockdown and online work, we decided to meet up and discuss our initial thoughts about this period.

Together with colleagues from the European Civic Forum, a transnational network that brings together over 100 associations and NGOs across 27 countries in Europe, actively working on issues such as citizenship education, the defence of human rights and advocacy for democracy, we spent a few hours in an impassioned debate. Everyone had his or her national perspective, but the conclusions were similar.

On the basis of these discussions, we drafted the following lessons...

Lesson one: Our security depends on other people's security  
We need universal health and social protection for everybody in our society and all over the world.

Lesson two: We are all vulnerable and our destinies are interwoven.  
Solidarity, equality, rights and caring must be at the base of international relations and of people's daily reality.

Lesson three: The common good exists  
Public institutions must serve, protect and implement the common good, not specific interests.

Lesson four: Democracy is the crucial antivirus we all need  
Citizens' awareness, civic participation, trustworthy information, public research and education and transparent institutions all ensure the public good.

Lesson five: The global market system has failed  
We have to relocate production, implement the circular economy and have a universal basic income for all.

Lesson six: We are the earth's custodians, not its owners  
Nature is using our lockdown to recover from the damage we have caused. We must restore environmental justice to the world.



Lesson seven: Essential workers are real heroes. Women are at the forefront

Women's contribution has to be recognised in the social hierarchy, those who are invisible must be able to fully access their rights.

Lesson eight: Time has to slow down

Lockdown forced us to give full place to social bonds, patience, compassion: we have to keep this in the long run.

Lesson nine: We need human, social, ecological security

We commit ourselves to a just recovery and a just transition in our country, in Europe and all over the world.

Lesson ten: The future must be different from the past

We need to learn from these lessons and act together.

Do we have a chance to learn more after the crisis? Are we able to turn the crisis into a new chance?

I am convinced that the future must be different from the past.



Martin Siecker:

# "Always look on the bright side of life"

Would I like to share my thoughts, analysis and emotions on how I experience the Corona crisis in 2000 characters? Not much for something disruptive like that, one character per century. But anyway, my thoughts are private and chaotic.

Everything is new, this is the first pandemic I've experienced personally. Searching on the internet I found a list with the 10 worst pandemics in history and I learned that the last one to hit Europe before Covid 19 was the Spanish Flu in 1920. And I may be old - but I'm not that old.



My partner is very contagious due to reduced resistance to germs and if she catches something she is extremely vulnerable a chronic respiratory lung disease. So we are very reluctant to have contacts with others. That brings new experiences for both of us. She is more or less in self-chosen isolation to prevent being infected. And I have to do things she used to do

before, like buying groceries. Pre-crisis, I participated, pushing the shopping-cart 1 meter behind her while she filled it. But now it's different.

Pushing is easy; you just follow and think about creating a better world while she fills the cart. Since I have to fill it myself, I'm paralyzed with choice stress at every shelf. The shopping list asks coffee, the shelf offers dozens of different brands that all look the same. And what toilet paper do we need - with 1, 2, 3 or 4 layers? My wife knows which product she wants and where they are, we're in-and-out in minutes. To me shops are labyrinths: only in the beer department I don't feel choice stress, all the rest takes me hours - lost in maddening dilemmas.

I was surprised by the initial response of the Dutch towards the pandemic. They reacted unanimously and with solidarity. Unfortunately the human attention span turned out to be pretty short for a small group of entangled and otherwise deplorable individuals, within a few weeks their solidarity crumbled. People stopped respecting the rules, blamed the government for undermining their fundamental rights and limiting their four freedoms. So, in order to claim their unalienable right to party they filed law suits against the state - lost in raging madness.

Thank goodness we live in Europe, where democracy and rule of law are relatively well guaranteed (in most member states) and healthcare is pretty good compared to other parts of the world. Looking at how it affects different generations it's clear the young suffer most of the virus that reflects their age. At 19 you're supposed to date, to explore your sexuality and to discover that crazy little thing called love. In times of pandemics even innocent hugs are taboo. These kind of things make young people insecure - lost in unsatisfied desire.

The key question is what to do with the economy. A restart based on the principle 'business as usual' when the pandemic is under control? Or grab this opportunity, turn away from a system dominated by cannibalistic monopolists and move into an inclusive model with sustainable, small scale initiatives in peaceful coexistence with liable big businesses? the choice between going on with business as usual or change our lemming's behaviour will define our future and decide if we will be alive or extinct - lost in the abyss of self destruction.

I wish you all a nice time, with meditation, reflection and – to whom it may concern – repentance.



Jože Smole:

# "We have come out of the crisis united and stronger"



We were faced with a situation we had never experienced before. The virus was suddenly here and it was spreading very quickly, which led to the entire country being placed under complete quarantine. Since the situation was unprecedented, we had no experience of how to deal with it in the most efficient way. What next, we wondered. At the beginning we were terrified and helpless. In business, all plans for the current year (2020) were dropped practically in an instant, and because of the uncertain situation, all future plans are surrounded by a high degree of uncertainty as well.

We were all asking ourselves the same question: what next? How do we act in this new situation: the quarantine, complete isolation and no way of knowing when it will be over? The greatest fears and worries are always caused by the inability to predict what will happen next. Businesses, too, initially reacted similarly. They all wanted us to tell them how long this situation would continue, what the response of the government would be and what kind of aid they could count on. Already at a very early stage, it was starting to become clear that not all of us were in the same position: for some economic sectors, such as tourism and logistics, the crisis meant ruin, while to others, such as the IT sector and the food industry, it brought new opportunities and challenges.

We were fortunate that the government, although newly formed, responded quickly and adequately, so that together we were drafting programmes of action, support, incentives etc. For this purpose, we maintained consistent direct contact

with a large number of our members from different sectors, in order to be as well informed as possible about the situation in individual sectors, gather as many ideas as we could about what form of aid would be most efficient, and provide information to government representatives.

What I miss the most are face-to-face communication and contacts. The fact is that during this period, communication has moved online as much as possible, while face-to-face communication has largely disappeared. The giant digitalisation leap in electronic communication among businesses and between the state and businesses, as well as with the public and users, can be considered one of the biggest benefits of COVID-19.

Results have shown us that what is most important is good organisation and discipline on the part of all citizens in accepting and respecting instructions and measures, as only these can lead to the right solutions.

The fact is that COVID-19 will bring about changes in many fields. However, we do not even know how long the COVID-19 epidemic will last; nor do we know whether, in the wake of the epidemic, we will start counting the periods between one wave of COVID-19 and the next, as we will not be able to shake off the virus permanently. The crisis has manifested itself in all areas, from education and health to the financial and economic sectors, inter alia. We do not know what the situation will be like once the crisis is over or how severely the economy will be affected.

Many changes will come about that are as yet unknown; therefore it is wrong to be asking which jobs will be cut. We must all strive to make sure that when the crisis is over, our businesses and thus our jobs will be as competitive as possible. We will achieve this not only with the help of state aid but also through continuous education at all levels.

The fact is that the period of isolation has clearly shown us that digital communication alone cannot replace face-to-face contact, whether in schools, when doing business or during other activities. Thus, our goal, naturally, is to re-establish face-to-face communication, both within our association and with all those with whom we are currently communicating only through online tools.

Janusz Pietkiewicz:

# "Services of General Interest and the Pandemic"

As February turned into March, while studies and debates were taking place, we shared in the joyful Martenitsa celebrations of our Bulgarian friends, as we do at this time every year. We wore thin bracelets of braided red and white string and little woollen ragdolls were given as a token of good luck.

The optimism of the coming spring was palpable. We wished each other success for the final stage of the five-year term of office at the EESC.

We instinctively stayed away from the threat to our orderly lives in the heart of the EU posed by the virus that was spreading in Asia. It's true that signs and serious warnings were already reaching us from southern Europe, but we had to protect the procedures of the European institutions from the pandemic.



And besides, as our colleagues from beyond the Danube joked, as a last resort a drop of medicine from the home pharmacy – i.e. Martenitsa rakia – couldn't hurt. Indeed, calls for disinfectants in meeting rooms were ignored, but we were always ensured that the risk was being carefully monitored, so our fears about the virus were assuaged.

As of Wednesday 11 March, I was still discussing recommendations on the sustainable Europe investment plan in the ECO/505 study group. In the sections, we made action plans and booked our next trips, and then suddenly, a week later, life ground to a halt. Lockdown! I could compare it metaphorically to a train suddenly slamming on the breaks, shooting sparks from under its wheels.

No one expected the containment measures that were growing stricter every day. It struck at the very foundations of our lives. It was a psychological tsunami, peculiar, as the poet Ildefonso Gálvez would say, «a sadness flowing through the mindset». It was surprise at the need to stay at home and the everyday fear. It was questions about the possibility of getting help and essential products, rethinking our habits.

I didn't think that I would not come back to Brussels until June, travelling by car along empty highways, because the flights had not started running again. I remember printing out the «license» to travel that I received by email from the secretary-general – the COVID-19 laissez-passier, issued on 29 May 2020 in four languages and adorned with an imposing round stamp. This was meant to guarantee that I would not be held in quarantine.

To be on the safe side, I confirmed this by phone with the German Gesundheitsamt offices of the regions I had to travel through. On 8 June in Brussels I took part in the first hybrid meeting of the ECO/510 study group and then in the plenary session of 10 and 11 June.

Public and social media were already flooded with commentary and suspicions as to the imagined real creators of the virus. It's a shame that, at least for the time being, it has not led to a contemporary masterpiece along the lines of Giovanni Boccaccio's 14th century Decameron or Albert Camus's 1947 novel The Plague, which truly demonstrate the shortcomings of human nature and the fight of humanity against disease.

In terms of the experience of the worldwide lockdown and warnings of a further attack of SARS-CoV-2, this time in combination with seasonal flu, which costs many lives each year in many countries – even more so than COVID-19 currently does, I thought about the meaning of «services of general interest», which have been neglected for decades.

The COVID-19 pandemic finally demonstrated the highly important and stabilising function of local, regional and Europe-wide suppliers of these services. The social sphere has finally started to believe in their essential role, which is the backbone of the European social model and potentially of a positive recovery of the economy in the framework of the Next Generation EU and European Green Deal instruments.

Energy and water services, waste processing and public transport in times of economic crisis have ensured that the ebbs and flows of life in our communities can continue and have provided security. After all, without previous investments in these sectors, it would not be possible to deal with everyday issues, like taking a morning shower at home, making coffee, or getting to work or the hospital on time. This also applies to issues of healthcare, care for people with disabilities and elderly people. They would not work without crisis management procedures, or if services of general interest had not found political understanding and public support.

Similarly, we need to look at the hugely important area of education, research and the general concept of culture, and only then can we complain about the difficulties we have experienced during the crisis.

Giulia Barbucci:

# "Over these months, the voice of the trade unions has been stronger than ever"



11 March, back to Rome, back home. Heavy atmosphere, anxiety; in Northern Italy they are already counting the dead. My daughter Ilaria has returned from Milan where she studies; my eldest, Miriam, lives and works in Barcelona, and is very worried.

In the evening, the prime minister Mr Conte announces a lockdown for the whole country. A lockdown is already in place in the "red zones" in the North, requiring people from those areas to isolate.

The schools are closed, the football league and recreational and sporting activities suspended, and visiting patients in hospital is prohibited. No travel is allowed by public or private transport, and non-essential economic activities are halted.

A cloak of unreality envelopes Italy. Disorientation, fear: the virus seems to be getting out of control and becoming unstoppable.

Two images encapsulate the harsh reality: the convoy of military trucks in Bergamo transporting bodies out of the region, as the cemeteries were full, and the powerful, indelible image of Pope Francis praying in an empty St Peter's Square, broadcast worldwide on television on 28 March.

The Italian trade unions took action immediately with the government on ensuring the safety of essential businesses, which had to be kept open to ensure that people could purchase essential supplies in supermarkets and medicines in pharmacies. The trade unions never stopped working, supporting those losing their jobs, seeking agreements with employers to launch remote working, and securing income support, with incomes becoming insecure.

The hospitals are overwhelmed: running out of beds, and with intensive care units pushed to their limits, as also are health workers: nurses, doctors, orderlies forced to stay away from home in quarantine, working flat out, with the huge psychological burden of caring for people who are dying without the comfort of their loved ones.

At that time we all said that "we would not forget what had happened". Now we are trying to move forward, but the virus is not defeated: small or large outbreaks are popping up across the EU, and each country is responding in its own way, with its own measures. It is precisely now that the EU, thanks to the huge economic support it has deployed for all countries, should act in a united way by coordinating the efforts of individual Member States; we realise, however, how difficult this still is. But we will not win this war acting individually.

Over these months, the voice of the trade unions has been stronger than ever. The trade union is not an abstract concept: it is workers pointing a country towards rightful demands for social equality, dignity and respect. People who have experienced the reality of the hospitals, care homes for the elderly, shops, cleaning, transport, businesses in which basic workplace health and safety rights are infringed can tell us how to change an economic and social model that is revealing its limitations and threatening the future of those who will come after us.

So, this is what I would like for my daughters, Ilaria studying in Milan, and Miriam working in Barcelona: a world that fits them, and is sustainable economically, environmentally and socially.



Dilyana Slavova:

# "COVID-19 has taught me not to delay my life projects"

The impact of the pandemic made borders in Europe visible again, sometimes even within the same country. One might think that, as a result, the scope for transnational cooperation among regions and cities has decreased. But actually, quite the opposite has happened.

So what was it like to live through the lockdown in Bulgaria? Well, for a dynamic and energetic outdoors enthusiast like me, it was hard. There were many restrictions. We had to stay at home and could only go out during the opening hours of essential shops to buy food, medicines or household goods. Social distancing of >1.5 m was compulsory when walking inside and outside the shops. It was rather complicated: whenever you left the city of Sofia, you had to fill out a form stating the reason and the place where you were going. You were required to show it to the police upon request.



The positive news is that the population has become much more self-sufficient and residents are much more appreciative of local food, local providers and short food supply chains. Demand for food from farms and food purchased directly from growers has increased. Grassroots initiatives are promoting gardening and small-scale production of vegetables and herbs.

Market places remain open to the public. They represent a traditional place for the sale of food, seeds, vegetable seedlings, fruit and vegetables and flowers. Leaving them open – with strict safety measures to be respected – contributes to preserving a sense of normality and a familiar routine.

In the mountain areas local action groups have also been very active. To further support local producers of home-grown food during the epidemic, they have been collecting and sharing useful contacts on their websites.

Indeed, in compliance with various travel and contact restrictions, in my organisation we all had to cancel many of the physical meetings and events which usually make it easier to set up cooperative initiatives and disseminate the results. However, these restrictions did not stop our activities – far from it. We are continuing to work together efficiently to make mountain regions stronger and even more resilient. In some cases, we adapted our work plans and are now developing common solutions to help vulnerable EU regions and cities cope better with the current emergency.

We started a «Giving a hand» a platform to foster solidarity in rural areas. It promotes solidarity between people, connecting persons in need of assistance with volunteers who are willing to literally «give a hand». Its current activities are focused on helping vulnerable, disabled and elderly people with shopping or homecare (not personal care) and on arranging babysitting for parents who have to work and cannot not find another solution for their children.

Many other initiatives have flourished in rural and mountainous areas, giving an insight into the resilience and strong sense of mutual assistance that flourish in our communities. What I learnt during this time is that I should not delay my life projects! Being active saves us in difficult times.

Claudine Otto: \_\_\_\_\_

“Greater autonomy regarding globalisation should be considered at European level”



The streets have been deserted since the lockdown was declared. The most striking thing is the silence. Gone are the race for jobs, travelling abroad for a two hour meeting, the honking horns of city traffic, the bus that doesn't come... Like so many others, we have complied with this forced confinement, trying our hardest to deal with this new way of life. While teleworking was easy for me, it was inconceivable for my husband, as his job and the infrastructure were (and are still) not suitable for it. This lack of suitability cost him several sleepless nights as a result of record absenteeism by his employees. Fear has spread at least as fast as the virus itself.

Now that the first wave has passed, I wonder what mental, social and economic condition we will be in when we emerge from this crisis. If the pandemic allowed for a new hierarchy of needs and environmental awareness, it has also borne witness to individual behaviours on a national and global scale. No one

in Luxembourg would have believed that the borders could be closed again. Cross-border work is essential in the Grand Duchy and the restriction of free movement of people has led to fears such as a shortage of healthcare workers.

This crisis is also an opportunity for introspection regarding our own vulnerability. We are discovering that we are dependant, not only on healthcare workers, but also on each other's behaviour.

We will achieve the economic recovery together. Let's avoid nationalism and the collapse of economies while some countries discuss nationalising value chains in the name of resilience. Greater autonomy regarding globalisation should be considered at European level. With this crisis, we have the opportunity, for example, to stop for a moment, which should help us reflect on ourselves.

Renate Heinisch:

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# "Stamping out loneliness together"

As a pharmacist, I have been paying close attention to the question of gender medicine during the coronavirus pandemic. The gender differences in COVID-19 are particularly striking in the field of mental health.

Men – particularly young men – are more likely to require intensive care, and more likely to die.

Since the lockdown, young women have been falling ill more often, due to their new role in society: precarious employment, more part-time work, more contact with people, less working from home, more care work.

We need to take another look at the roles of women and older people in families, because there is also discrimination against older people. I will keep having conversations about this.

Recently, I have been sitting on the bench outside our chemist's shop discussing these things with family members, and they were all happy having these conversations.

I have also stood in the street outside our local care home and greeted the residents up in their rooms, and we have sung together.

We need to stamp out loneliness and support family members. Policy must take account of this in stimulating employment in this area, but until that is achieved we all need to provide support.

I have also canvassed parents about educational issues and arranged video-conferences with teachers on media literacy.





Laure Batut: \_\_\_\_\_

# "Fear, resilience, and then?"



## First, fear and astonishment

Fear, real fear. A fear that has brought everything to a halt ... which – with the evening death toll – makes you fear for your dear ones, the young, the old and the vulnerable. A fear that reminds you that the shadows are circling, that they are waiting ...

Astonishment at the lack of preparedness of the French public health services and of the medical profession on the front line with the public behind the lines, all of them lacking basic resources for protecting themselves and caring for others. Astonishment too at the capacity of a country like France, including its overseas territories, to cease – all of a sudden – all signs of human activity and empty towns and schools after a winter of legitimate social discontent on the streets.

The world, which has become even more globalised as a result of the pandemic, with the lockdown fragmented into a multitude of individuals doing no more than living alongside one another, yet separately. The pandemic has widened all disparities.

## The return of the State

Public services, particularly health services, have the task of ensuring that life wins out. Gradually they have been given logistical support, with some measures that were just for show, such as the transfer of patients by train or helicopter, while private clinics that had declared their willingness to help were not asked for such help.

The State has given assistance to businesses delivering essential services in order to ensure that life can go on, through the provision of supplies, ensuring cleaning, etc.

But their employees were in very different situations as regards protection against the virus, and have not been systematically recompensed for their extra efforts.

## Then resilience

Resilience has come to the fore thanks to links – both essential and social – between teachers and their pupils, via networks, the telephone, radio and TV, and other media. It was necessary to fill the time, manage time and work. At 8 every evening,



the public – from their windows and doorsteps – applauded medical staff; the State had not given them the full recognition that had been expected.

Employees have re-discovered their own capacity for innovation. Teleworking, which had sometimes been denied to some employees, has spread at great speed. Parents, especially mothers, have had to take on two professions: their own, and that of teacher.

The trade unions' role as intermediaries between employees, employers and government has restored their legitimacy in the country. It is hoped that they will not only be listened to, but above all heard.

## Europe

The EU, thanks to the Commission's initial statements, has also astonished people!

The rescue plan that has been announced is much more than a Marshall Plan. A blast of recovery for Europe! But governments and Parliament were quick to find reasons for procrastination – of which we are all aware.

However, many small businesses – with few employees and very little funds – have already gone under in the country: small restaurants sold at a loss, young people who had just started out in the world of work .... The banks were not there for them. Employees have the right to partial unemployment benefits until September, but what will happen afterwards? Despite receiving aid from the relevant States, large companies, such as Air France-KLM (which received EUR 7 billion from the Netherlands and France), Airbus, etc. have laid off their employees. It is a scandal. All this when 700 000 young people will be arriving on the labour market after the summer...

## The day after?

It is beginning to look more and more like the day before! Firstly, because the virus is still in circulation. Secondly, because the reforms that were already under way 'before', will come back 'afterwards', while the world of work in France does not want any of it. The government is assuring the public that taxation will not be used to pay for the 13% drop in GDP, but this summer's litany of redundancies and price increases is never-ending, be it in the energy, transport, fruit and vegetables sectors, etc.

In view of the lessons from the crisis, the way work is organised will change. Teleworking, platform work and videoconferencing will need regulations that do not yet exist. After resilience, vigilance is the order of the day. Will the crisis reveal that those who are the strongest in economic terms always come out better and those with the least resources suffer more and more? In the Paris region, the poorest district is the one where there have been the most cases of the virus. Sadly, what is new here?

Bente Sorgenfrey:

## «Focusing on the essentials of my own life»



When the coronavirus crisis broke out in Denmark, on 11 March, my colleagues and I got busy ensuring an orderly shutdown for our members. Many employees had to work from home, others in stressful situations in hospitals, nursing homes and in the service sector, which remained open throughout the crisis. Clear answers and close cooperation with colleagues were necessities.

I am also vice-president in the European Trade Union Movement ETUC, so I also needed to work with colleagues in other countries. I was pleased that on 14 March we – the Danish government and the social partners – concluded a tripartite agreement on temporary wage compensation. The agreement covers employees working in private companies that are suffering particular financial hardship due to COVID-19.

Companies have used the new wage compensation scheme where they have opted out of the existing arrangements for temporarily laying off employees without pay. Support schemes were set up for small businesses, self-employed workers and freelancers. Some parts of the agreement expire soon and we are currently negotiating its replacement so that employees continue to be protected.

I myself have been working from home and I quickly became a superuser of new virtual tools. This time at home could have been very stressful because of uncertainty about the future, but in the end it let me focus entirely on my work and gave me more time with my family. I am convinced these recent months have given me and my colleagues a sharper focus on our core mission and contributed to greater discipline at meetings. It has also meant for me personally that I have been able to concentrate on the essentials of my own life.

Arnaud Schwartz:

# «Health, ecological, social and economic crises: let's cooperate for a liveable world»



A far cry from inward-looking nationalism and the temptation of authoritarianism, cooperation on a European scale is essential. It is vital that countries work together to combat the virus and to tackle its causes and consequences, especially as future pandemics – just like pollution, climate change and the biodiversity crisis – know no borders. Europe has powerful levers for putting the general interest back at the heart of the continent's development.

By improving the Green Deal, the Common Agricultural Policy and the multiannual financial framework (MFF) we could effect a major shift in European and national projects and financing to ensure that Europe, a world leader, takes the path towards a liveable world.

Prioritising cooperation over competition and moving from an individual to an international scale is far from plain sailing. Looking out only for our own interest seems so comfortable. Faced with this temptation, we must remember that this short-termist vision will lead to our downfall: it will come back to us with a violent boomerang effect. These are historical crises, the challenge seems immense and we will not be able to deal with it alone.

My call is clear: to get out of these crises we need to set aside our selfishness and cooperate in the general interest. Take care of yourself, your loved ones, strangers in need and the living environment around you, and let's try to expend our energies on ensuring that we come out of these unprecedented crises on top.



## European Economic and Social Committee

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