



EESC kick-off event in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe

Bringing the European project back to citizens
Brussels, 10 June 2021

Report



European Economic
and Social Committee



Conference
on the **Future**
of Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) kick-off event ‘Bringing the European project back to citizens’ was held in the context of the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Conference is a year-long public consultation that was first proposed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. It is jointly organised by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission.

It aims to gather the views of European citizens on the priorities and changes they want from the European Union in key areas. The input will inform recommendations from the Conference for follow up by the three EU institutions.

The EESC has a pivotal role in this process. Since 1958, it has been the voice of civil society, with an extensive network of members. It provides employers, workers and organisations representing the diversity of European society with a say in EU decision making.



This launch event on 10 June marked the beginning of EESC action to ensure that its members and those they represent can participate fully in the first direct Europe-wide consultation of citizens on EU-policy-making.

Participants and speakers attended the four-hour event in both the main meeting room of the EESC in Brussels and online. In total, almost 2 000 people from as far apart as Dublin and Budapest logged in to hear 16 speakers representing the EESC, the European Commission, the European Parliament, industry, national government, the trade-union movement, European movements and experts in fundamental rights.

Representatives discussed their hopes for the Conference and the future of Europe in four panels that touched on shared fundamental values as well as possible frameworks for a sustainable economic and social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and for resilient societies.

As EESC President Christa Schweng said in her welcome address: ‘We have reasons today to be optimistic, for the recovery and for much more.’ She called on decision-makers to listen to organised civil society and to citizens when shaping the EU’s future:

‘The EU belongs to them,’ she said.

OPENING

Speakers from the EESC, the European Commission and the European Parliament opened the event after an introduction from moderator Brian Maguire.



Ms Schweng welcomed participants on behalf of the EESC. She applauded the solidarity, strength and budget response of the EU in the recent health and economic crisis. She said that civil society could help to create a Europe that is better prepared for the next challenges, both expected and unknown.

She called for a European narrative ‘which does not only look at the past [...] but also and foremost to the future.’ Indeed, the

EESC’s recent resolution on this aspect promotes a vision of Europe as a guardian and promoter of shared fundamental values, open trade and multilateralism, and sustainable prosperity, with a social model based on fair competition and solidarity. ‘We want our citizens to feel that too,’ she added.

With this in mind, Ms Schweng urged openness and accountability in processing ideas from the Conference, suggesting the creation of an online dashboard that allows citizens to track progress. She said that the EESC will be critical in providing recommendations and helping to reconnect European institutions and policies with citizens. ‘We are now ready to work, and starting from today we will provide our contribution,’ she concluded.

Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission and member of the CoFoE executive board continued the introduction. ‘For the first time ever, the Conference brings citizens into the heart of policymaking in the European Union,’ she said. ‘Civil society is a key partner in ensuring that every voice is heard.’



Ms Šuica preferred not to put forward her own proposals. ‘We cannot preempt or influence the outcome of these deliberations.’ She added that she is committed to following up on input from a process that she believes reinforces the EU’s evolving democracy. ‘We [...] should not lack confidence in the ability of citizens, together with civil society, to contribute concretely and provide us with a substantive response.’

She underscored the values shared between the EESC and the EU institutions – intergenerational solidarity, gender equality and just, green and digital transitions – and their joint ambition to strengthen links between citizens and the institutions that serve them. ‘The EESC is a vital partner in and key to making this process a success. I am looking forward to our cooperation,’ she added.

The final opening speaker was **Eva Maydell**, an MEP and President of the European Movement International. ‘Now it is time to get into the concrete details and, most importantly, move forward,’ she said. She called for a ‘bolder vision’ of Europe. ‘It has to be a plan to deepen European integration in certain sectors, which could make us better prepared, more resilient, safer, more secure and more prosperous.’

One concern was whether ‘we can do more to increase the engagement among citizens and organisations.’ She suggested that national broadcasters and media could help to increase citizens’ low awareness of the consultation.



The cooperation between the European Movement International and the EESC is welcome. ‘We are uniquely positioned to reach those citizens,’ she said. ‘By working together [...] we can ensure that civil society and citizens across Europe are truly actively and meaningfully [...] engaged in the Conference.’

PANEL 1

Shared fundamental values for Europe and beyond

The discussion in the first expert panel opened with Slido poll for all participants, which asked 'What fundamental values unite European citizens?' The most prominent answers in the resulting word cloud were 'Equality', 'Democracy', 'Solidarity' and 'Freedom'.

These were reflected to the keynote speech by **Dr Manfred Nowak**, Professor for International Human Rights and Scientific Director of the Vienna Master of Arts in Human Rights. The European Union is 'founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' and is 'a value-driven supranational organisation aimed at promoting fundamental rights within its Member States as well as human rights and democracy worldwide,' he said.

These values are shared by EU citizens, he noted. However, as Europe faces challenges such as terrorism, climate crises and rapid

digitalisation, citizens need to feel that the EU is 'actively living and promoting these fundamental values'. He predicted that 'lasting peace can only be achieved and maintained if there is a feeling of social justice and coherence among European citizens and a basic trust that the EU is able and willing to solve the enormous global threats and challenges in an open, transparent and non-bureaucratic manner'.

Morten Kjærum, Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law took up this theme. The European Union's legal framework 'creates the basis for a deep respect for freedom of expression and freedom of the media'. He added that Europe has built institutions within a human rights framework, learning lessons from the past: 'This feature of Europe needs to be better understood and protected.'



Mr Kjærum sounded the alarm on challenges to the rule of law, growing inequality and the climate crisis. 'Integrating these topics [...] in the narrative has the potential to re-engage Europeans in the common project,' he said, and especially young people.

He added that cities had 'the power and possibility' to foster a shared vision of Europe by linking local communities, government institutions and cross-city networks and praised the work in this field of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Helena de Felipe Lehtonen, Vice-President of the EESC ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL) concluded this panel. She explained: 'We want to promote a culture of fundamental rights at the European level, in particular with regard to European values.'



She called on civil society to combine forces against the regression in fundamental rights in some Member States. She said that there is a need to provide more information and education, to step up judicial independence and freedom of the press and to strengthen the social-economic dimension, which could capture the interest of citizens.

She added that connections with civil society organisations can strengthen a culture of fundamental rights: 'We have to continue working at the EU level with national counterparts and civil society to make sure that the links remain strong.'

Questions from the audience followed. These focused on the erosion of the separation of powers, whether funding should be leveraged to protect freedoms, and challenges to democracy and rights outside the EU. Mr Kjaerum said that the EU needs to go further in addressing attacks on rule of law if people are not to lose trust in the EU. Dr Nowak pointed out that linking funding to rule of law could overcome the likely lack of a unanimous vote to invoke more formal penalties under the Treaty on European Union. Finally, Mr Kjaerum argued for consistent action on human rights and more serious engagement with bodies such as the African Union.

PANEL 2

Sustainable economic recovery, skills and innovation

A multiple-choice Slido poll on the key elements required for a healthy economy prompted the second panel's discussions. 'Investing in skills fit for the future' attracted 55% of votes, and was to be a theme from all speakers.

Stefano Mallia, President of the Employers' Group, opened this panel. Mr Mallia shared his vision for the EU: 'For me and for the Employers' Group, this would be a prospering Europe that successfully recovers from the COVID-19 crisis and leads the world in the green and digital transitions.'



He added that this future would offer companies of all sizes the chance to become more productive, competitive, generate growth and jobs and make it possible to offer each European a good quality of life.

He focused on the need for public bodies and businesses to invest in skills, notably digital skills, STEM subjects, cross-cutting skills and life-long learning, to strengthen links between businesses and education providers, to make full use of EU funds and

to complete the single market, 'one of our greatest assets'.

The Conference is a 'unique occasion to engage in a constructive discussion', Mr Mallia said.

Ivonne Bollow, Global Director of Corporate Public Policy at international wholesaler Metro AG continued the debate. She pointed out that as SMEs represent 99% of all businesses and a third of the working population in the EU, 'bringing Europe to citizens means bringing it to SMEs'.

'Investing in digitalisation and innovation is a very important ingredient,' she said. She also called for sustainability policies to work across the economy, with support for SMEs to adapt their practices more quickly.



In terms of skills, 'the rapid pace of technology embraces all sectors and sub-sectors. So lifelong learning becomes key [...] to ensure that the workforce is kept up to date', Ms Bellow said. She suggested a European Erasmus-style programme as one solution.

She added that a completed single market is a prerequisite for a healthy economy: 'We need to define a joint understanding of how the internal market can serve all actors along the supply line, locally and beyond.'

The conference paused for a musical interlude by Brussels Muzieque, a classical chamber music platform of musicians, mainly from Belgian national orchestras.

Mr Oettinger, President of United Europe and former EU Commissioner then gave his keynote speech. He said that Europe has fallen behind economically, technologically and has to become competitive. He repeated the call for digital skills to be developed 'among all workers, from the boss to the intern'.

He added, 'We also have to build on our internal market – start-ups, takeovers – and we also need to support family businesses [...] That is a cultural good and deserves support.' He suggested that an innovation strategy for Europe, not just the EU, would make sense. He stressed the need to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy, and called for Europe to better attract skilled non-Europeans and investors.



Policy should focus on the economic future, he emphasised. This could include programmes to encourage continued work and reskilling later in life, ensuring that climate action avoids unintended consequences and encouraging entrepreneurship. 'We have to teach our children [...] that they have an interest in autonomy, independence and self-reliance, then they will be able to take over and take our economy forward,' he said.

Mr Oettinger also called on the European Commission and Council to develop European industrial policy more quickly and to consult more widely with stakeholders in the economy: 'It is the economy that creates new jobs, businesspeople, entrepreneurs. Therefore, there has to be a dialogue at European and national level.'

After a summary from each speaker, the moderator highlighted a comment in the chat that mentioned the difficulty of competing with companies that pay taxes offshore and that do not respect labour and environment laws.

PANEL 3

Sustainable social recovery, job creation and just transition

The next panel began after a Slido poll asking participants to pick European Union priorities for the social recovery. Respondents favoured ensuring a fair and just green and digital transition, followed by implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers' Group hailed the Conference for the Future of Europe as 'a very good example of involving all stakeholders, including the European Economic and Social Committee, in their priorities, in their policies.'



He noted that the social partners and trade unions are among the most important stakeholders, representing millions of workers in Europe and advocated finding new frameworks that strengthen workers' rights and voices while raising fundamental social rights to the same level as market freedoms.

Mr Röpke added: 'We have the responsibility to show to European citizens, workers and businesses that a fairer and more inclusive

Europe is possible.' He and the Workers' Group believe that 'we have to promote public sustainable investment in a green and digital economy but also in a social recovery which is to go hand in hand with an economic recovery.'

Ana Mendes Godinho, Minister for Employment, Solidarity, and Social Security of Portugal, noted in her keynote speech that: 'It is the first time the three EU institutions [...] have come together with national parliaments, regional and local authorities, social partners, civil society on a truly common project.'

'The EU is a community of values and a space with a unique social model in the world,' she said. 'Protection and equality of opportunity for everyone is what drives us.'



However, ‘we can do better’, she said. The Portuguese presidency aims to make the Conference an inclusive platform, bringing together different voices engaging on a wide reflection going beyond Brussels and national capitals and reaching out to European citizens, Ms Mendes Godinho added.

Concretely, she called for a focus on structural investment, more resilient economies and labour markets, social dialogue, innovation and modernisation of companies and training, including attention to precarious employment. She discussed the success of the Porto Social Summit and its important commitment to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights as proof of the power of cooperation within civil society. ‘Social dialogue is crucial to guarantee social peace. Let’s do it together,’ she concluded.

Luca Visentini, Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) was the last speaker. ‘We need to listen to citizens, to organised civil society, to stakeholders, to all the people that want to say something about what Europe they want for the future...,’ he said. ‘And we need to make sure they can really participate – that there can be channels for concrete, democratic participation.’

He added: ‘We need to reimagine our economic model, making sure it is really sustainable and inclusive.’ He called for quality jobs, strong social protection and inclusion.



‘We need to rebuild our European social model, a social model that was a benchmark and an example to the world,’ he said. He added that there was a need to boost equality and social justice, defend the rule of law and give elected institutions such as the European Parliament more power and visibility.

‘If we are united and cooperate with each other and boost social, economic and institutional dialogue, I am convinced we can make it,’ he ended.

PANEL 4

Sustainable, inclusive and participative societies

The final panel opened with a keynote speech from **Dr Seán Healy**, CEO of Social Justice Ireland.

He thanked the organisers for driving forward the Conference. 'Europe needs it badly,' he said. Among other topics, he mentioned that 'we still have 18 million people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the Union'.

He called for 'a new social contract' with 'strong, ambitious targets'. He mentioned that many people in Europe also feel that their voices are not heard in shaping policies, adding 'two-tier societies are bad for business as well as bad for citizens'.

Dr Healy noted the need for social dialogue about all the major issues that will shape our

future. 'That social dialogue should include civil society on an equal footing with employers and trade unions,' he said.

He advocated a social contract that focuses on delivering a vibrant economy, decent services and infrastructure, just taxation, good governance and sustainability in parallel. 'Unless they are done simultaneously, then we are condemned to fail again in delivering a Europe that has a place for everybody,' he said.

The next speaker, **Séamus Boland**, President of the Diversity Europe Group called for more focus on sustainability issues. 'Sustainability is at heart of our group, Diversity Europe,' he said. 'If we fail to include civil society in the social dialogue discussions then we have effectively excluded millions of people and millions of groups from participating in the Conference on the Future of Europe.'

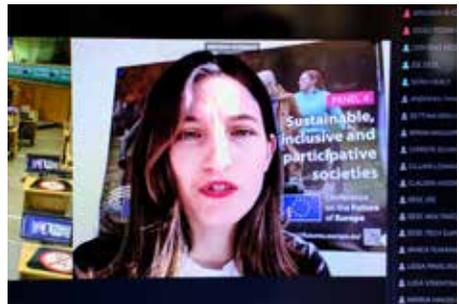


In the context of the Conference, policymakers need to imagine and to build equal, resilient and sustainable communities and societies. 'This requires bottom-up initiatives. It requires the embracing of new definitions of wellbeing and development beyond GDP,' he stated.

Addressing the online audience, Mr Boland said: 'You are here because you really want to make sure that you have a say and a voice in a society that does not repeat past mistakes... Let us hope that these deliberations and many more will bring a very different, just, inclusive society into being.'

Brikena Xhomaqi, Co-president of the Liaison Group and Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), said: 'The world is changing, and so is politics.' 'We must shift into a bottom-up process where we co-create and co-design policies with the citizens.' Ms Xhomaqi added: 'We just need to create more spaces for cooperation, more spaces for exchanges of good practices, more spaces to learn from each other.'

Civil society had helped her to address her earlier lack of awareness about Europe, she said. 'I had the chance to get engaged in European networks and that brought me all that knowledge about Europe and understanding of how it functions in order to be able to influence it.'



Despite the need for European institutions to consult more with civil society, 'we also have a role in building consensus at all levels across countries and have a strong voice in the European policy and legal discussions,' she said.

CLOSING REMARKS

Cillian Lohan, Vice-President of the EESC, thanked all participants: 'We can easily agree on some of the broader objectives... What is really valuable with the Conference on the Future of Europe is designing along with citizens how we are going to get there.'

He added: 'We are in the final steps of launching a series of debates all over Europe with our members, with our civil society partners so that we can reach every corner of the EU to get ideas, thoughts and ambitions.'

Ms Schweng concluded the proceedings. 'Today was our starting point to harvest the views of EU citizens and organised civil society with a view to work on a stronger and a more resilient Europe,' she noted. 'Today's discussions and the ideas expressed throughout the afternoon are highly appreciated.'

She added: 'However, we need to go beyond Brussels. We need to reach out to each and every corner of the EU and gather citizens' ideas and proposals for the European future. The second step needs to be bringing the EU project back to citizens and to shape Europe according to their needs, ideas and ambitions.'



Ms Schweng said the EESC is ready to make the effort to ensure this input occurs: 'I am confident we will seize the opportunity to bring the EU project back to citizens... Let's make Europe a truly great place to be and prosper.'





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