CONNECTING EU Seminar

What kind of Europe do you dream of?

Civil society and the Conference on the Future of Europe

18–19 November 2021

Gulbenkian Foundation | Lisbon, Portugal

#ConnectingEU2021  @EESC_PRESS
The EESC “Connecting EU” seminar is an event mainly directed to communication professionals working for civil society organisations representing employers, workers and other social, occupational, economic and cultural organisations across Europe.

Every year, the “Connecting EU” seminar focuses on a topic that has captured the attention of media in Europe in the run-up to the seminar and engages journalists, academic, experts and civil society in debate.
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Dear readers,

This brochure brings you the highlights and the main findings of the EESC Connecting EU 2021 seminar, an event which brought together communication professionals, policy-makers, journalists and researchers to discuss the Conference on the Future of Europe. Its main goal was to encourage civil society organisations in the Member States to engage in the conference by explaining how it worked, and why it mattered.

“This is not some abstract debate about complex legal and institutional issues. This is not for insiders only. This is for all of us,” was the EESC’s key message to guest communicators from partner organisations, whose potential reach back home numbered in the millions of members.

Organised amid great uncertainty as successive COVID-19 waves hit Europe, it was eventually held in a lull between infection peaks, in a sunny Lisbon that was reaping the benefits of a record-high vaccination rate. This fortunate timing made it one of the rare events of the last two years to fully take place in person, with passionate debates, live interviews and plenty of networking in between sessions.

Like the conference itself, we chose a thematic approach to discussing Europe’s future, focusing on three of its key topics: health, economy and jobs and democracy – in particular the role of press freedom in ensuring a functioning democracy.

One red thread that ran through the seminar was the perception that the pandemic had turned the tide on the EU, creating the momentum for change.

• Europe’s outstanding success in rising to the vaccination challenge had paved the way for a leap forward towards “more EU” in the health domain. Some even saw a European Health Union as a possible template for the EU-27’s future development: “perhaps this is the way forward”, they suggested, i.e. going for more only where there is clear consensus that it is in the general interest for Europe to be in the driving seat.
• The EU’s move away from the long-prevalent austerity dogma, which had caused a lot of pain in several Member States in previous years, was seen as a game changer, as was the issuing of common debt for the first time in EU history. Many wished for this supportive approach to outlive the recovery effort.

• Finally, the COVID crisis had painfully driven home the importance of having good, independent journalism, showing the impact of disinformation on large swathes of the European population. Recognising journalism as a public good and supporting it as such at EU level emerged as an antidote to many of the threats that the news media is facing today, whether from illiberal democracies, powerful economic interests, or the crisis of its business model.

As you will see in the following pages, surveys run during sessions also showed that overall, participants thought the EU should do more, rather than less, in all the three areas under discussion.

This is an encouraging sign and we hope it will be reflected in the final outcomes of the conference. We also hope that this report will inspire readers to contribute their ideas on the conference interactive platform, or back the ideas which emerged from our seminar, while there is still time to take part in this unique democratic experiment.

I wish you interesting reading.

Cillian Lohan
EESC Vice-President for Communication
Outcomes

The following ideas were expressed during the panels and debates and subsequently entered in the interactive platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe. They do not necessarily reflect the views of all speakers and participants in the seminar or the official position of the EESC as a EU body.

HEALTH

Make health a shared competence

We need to make health a shared EU competence by changing the Treaty, more specifically articles 168 (public health), 173 (industry), 4 (shared competences) and 6 (national competences) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. The COVID crisis has opened up this new opportunity for European integration and we must make the most of it.

We cannot rely on the open method of coordination to address a health threat in the future as we have had ample proof of its limits. We only have to look at the failure of the Lisbon strategy in the 2000s. With COVID there has been a clear understanding between the Member States that it is in their interest not to hamper common efforts, but if for whatever reason, such clear understanding fails to materialise in a future crisis, the EU’s real capacity to act in this field will be stumped.

A holistic approach is needed to building a European Health Union

Current efforts to build a European Health Union and especially the HERA instrument that is being developed are too crisis-driven. A European Health Union should be much more holistic and focused on the resilience of healthcare systems and common concerns, namely our common understanding of solidarity, the idea of universal access to healthcare, giving people access to prevention, mental health, health literacy, etc.

The way to do that is by involving the medical profession in discussions about the Health Union.

When you look at the national level, you see that health politics is in the hands of the health professions. Health experts are very crucial to the political discussions about what policy choices to make and that creates a lot of legitimacy. But in the EU, it is not the health professionals, but the internal market professionals that are involved. The most important reason to change the Treaty would be to involve national health authorities level. This right now is not possible. Hence the need for Treaty change, because otherwise the people that need to implement the EU laws keep resisting them.

Health has become a strategic area

Health has become a strategic area for the EU.

The EU is now a very diverse group of 27 Member States. Only interest can keep together such a disparate group of countries. We can only go as far as the Member States see it as being in their interest to go, and that’s exactly what the pandemic has shown: the coordination of some policies and actions was possible because the Member States wanted it, and they wanted it not out of generosity, but because they felt it was in their best interest and that there was no alternative.

Because everybody agrees on the need for deeper coordination in health matters, the European Health Union could be used as a pilot project to try to find new ways to stick together over and above differences. The European Health Union should be used as a strategic attempt to bring countries together around something where there is relative consensus on the need for unity.
A STRONGER ECONOMY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND JOBS

Solidarity measures in times of crisis work much better than austerity measures

EU measures based on solidarity rather than austerity, such as the next EU generation programme or the SURE programme launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, helped Europeans cushion the economic and social blows of the crisis. Unlike austerity measures applied during the financial crisis in the late 2000s, which brought countries like Greece down to their knees, solidarity measures helped restore some faith in the EU.

Under national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs), 30% of the funds have been allocated for social spending. However, to ensure they are effective in the long term, social investments in Member States should be accompanied by adequate reforms.

The EU must help countries to address the poverty problem and the problem of the working poor

Reasons for in-work poverty are many. Not having a work contract and not being protected by labour rights is one of them. Prospects of poverty rise with every additional child a working family may have. Poverty levels between Member States and between regions within a country differ considerably.

In markets with strong duality, in which only one segment of the labour market enjoys labour and social rights, social insurance systems which rely on labour earnings are no longer viable. The upcoming green and digital transition is also expected to hit those who are not protected by social insurance schemes the most. We need to detach social insurance from the labour market as much as possible. The EU must help the countries and devise policies that will be coordinated towards addressing the poverty problem and the problem of the working poor. Otherwise, there is not much sense in having free mobility of workers and capital, goods and services and not having some sort of centralised redistributive policy.

Progress on social policy requires clear commitments at EU level

Social policy may be a national matter, but without clear commitments at the EU level, the necessary progress will not be made. Working people want a Europe that delivers, they want decent wages and decent working conditions. The proposals such as the Minimum Wage Directive are a step in the right direction and we should go along this way.

Subordinating social rights to economic freedoms is no longer acceptable. We want to change this through a social progress protocol in the Treaties. This may not be feasible right away, but this demand gained much support from citizens at the Conference on the Future of Europe. It is of immense importance to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPRS). Political will to do this was expressed at the Porto Summit last May by all governments and stakeholders.

The EU proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages will not deliver

The EU proposal for a directive on minimum wages cannot deliver the expected results.

It fails to take into account the situation on the ground, i.e. different national social and collective bargaining circumstances. It can also possibly produce false results if it does not include national taxes or levies. Some trade unions reject the EU proposal fearing it would undermine their autonomy in setting wage levels.

Since national currencies can no longer be devaluated to compensate for macroeconomic imbalances, other adjustments must be made, such as transfers or the adjustment of prices and wages. Too rigid minimum wage rules would prevent this.
Social and labour market policies should remain a national competence. Instead of pushing for the integration of social systems, Europe should work on increasing macroeconomic integration and on harmonising taxes. The current situation in which countries attract corporations and rich individuals with tax preferences greatly undermines the needed solidarity in Europe.

**EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY - BUTTRESSING PRESS FREEDOM AGAINST LOOMING MULTIPLE THREATS**

**The EU must work towards making media literacy part of the school curriculum**

The EU should work towards ensuring media literacy and making it part of the curriculum for students in Europe. People cannot be expected to acquire it naturally. It is clear that in today’s complex and multifaceted media world we need more than ever to have the tools to spot and decode disinformation and propaganda in their many forms.

**SLAPPs must be banned**

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) should be banned in the EU. These actions aim to censor, intimidate or silence media conducting investigations through legal costs or simply fear and should have no place in the EU if press freedom is to be a reality.

The European Commission has announced anti-SLAPP measures at EU level to come in 2022 and this is important, because SLAPPs are of a cross-border nature, but national cases are still the majority and this needs to be taken into account.

**Journalism must be recognised as a public good by the EU**

Journalism in Europe should come to be valued and supported as a public good. This means putting in place the necessary rules.

In the wake of a global pandemic, there is increasing awareness of how quality journalism provides critical information for vitally important issues, ranging from public health to fair elections to conflicts. Because journalism is vital to democracy, it shouldn’t be treated as a mere commodity and valued only for its commercial aspect, but be given special consideration.

One way to promote quality journalism would be to offer EU public support for media, with clear arms’ length conditions and criteria to be respected. This could also be particularly helpful in countries where governments discriminate against non-aligned media and provide covert subsidies through state advertising. It would also help curb the crisis which has been affecting editorial staff since digital revolution.

**Violations of press freedom must be sanctioned**

Continued violations of press freedom in EU countries should be sanctioned. The Commission has recently included press freedom in the annual report on the rule of law and this is expected to be followed by country-by-country recommendations. Although a step in the right direction, the latter need to be followed by sanctions if no action is taken to implement the recommendations.
Violations of free speech and press freedom should be fined much in the same way as States which are found guilty of violating the European Convention on human rights by the European Court of Human Rights.

**The EU needs to define what press freedom means before it can take action**

The EU needs to define press freedom in light of processes underway in a number of Member States where press freedom formally exists but there are no proper processes in place to ensure media diversity and independence, access to information for independent journalists, access to media coverage for opposition parties, safety and working conditions for journalists and other essential requirements.
Welcome session

**Chair and introduction:** Cillian Lohan, EESC Vice-President for Communication
- Christa Schweng, EESC President
- Francisco Assis, President of the Economic and Social Council of Portugal
- Elza Pais, member of the Portuguese Parliament
  *The role of women in the debate on the future of Europe*

**Information talk:**
- Daniel Rosário, head of Communication and spokesperson, European Commission Representation in Portugal
  *How the CoFoE platform works*

**Key note interview:**
- Miguel Poiares Maduro, Universidade Católica Portuguesa and European University Institute
  *The Conference on the Future of Europe: what’s in it for civil society?*
Are you proud of our European dream?

The question we’re asking ourselves today is: What kind of Europe do you dream of? But I would like to challenge you with another question: Do you dare to dream about Europe? Are you proud of our European dream?

The Americans are proud of their American dream. They have made a trademark out of this ideal, which has come to stand for unlimited chances to achieve success no matter the starting point. Whether this is still the case in modern America is a different story, but that dream is an important part of national unity and pride.

I believe we have plenty of reasons to be proud of the European Union. Europe is delivering, and we should focus on building a new positive narrative for it.

The European dream was born in the past century as a dream of peaceful coexistence and prosperity. Unfortunately, the more that dream came true, the more Europeans took it for granted. It is still a dream for thousands of people pressing at our external borders though, ready to risk their lives to find shelter from war, authoritarian regimes and poverty in free, peaceful and prosperous Europe.

Christa Schweng
EESC President

The Conference on the Future of Europe will only be a success if we manage to get people to forge a new emotional link with the European Union through a shared narrative which does not only look at the past as a reason to stay together, but looks first and foremost to the future. The Conference on the Future of Europe is an experiment in addressing this issue.

“The Conference on the Future of Europe will only be a success if we manage to get people to forge a new emotional link with the European Union through a shared narrative which does not only look at the past as a reason to stay together, but looks first and foremost to the future”
To build a European dream, we have to overcome Europe’s fear of existing

A few years ago, one of the most eminent Portuguese philosophers, José Gil, wrote a book entitled “Portugal today: the fear of existing”. This book has curiously become a bestseller. A 900-year old country suddenly discovered that it was afraid of existing.

I believe Europe is equally afraid of existing. Europe always appears to us as a problem because it is still in search of an identity, of a space to occupy in the world, of an actual global political project.

We may disagree with the American dream, or not consider it applicable to Europe because, despite somme common aspects in our backgrounds, our histories and cultures are different. However, in order to build a European dream, we have to overcome this fear of fully being European. This fear must be left behind because the world has never needed a strong Europe as much as it does in today’s historical circumstances.

Three areas need to be addressed. Politically, in a complex, post-cold war world that is multilateral but where the institutions of multilateralism are not functioning properly, the presence of Europe on the political, diplomatic and defence scene is key.

Economically, we know that there is a deficit in European development - a lack of creativity and innovation with profoundly harmful consequences on the quality of life of Europeans. Overtaken by the United States, we are now being overtaken by China.

Finally, socially, we have some pressing issues to tackle. In Portugal, we know how much a more cohesive and a more supportive Europe is needed, a Europe that is genuinely concerned about the future opportunities of each European.

There are no countries “more European” than others - the founding members, those countries that joined later, those that became members after the fall of the Iron Curtain are all equally European. We all have the same status, the same rights and the same responsibilities.

“To build a European dream, we have to overcome the fear of fully being European. This fear must be left behind because the world has never needed a strong Europe as much as it does in today’s historical circumstances”
There is no future without equality

I shall start by quoting a great woman, the only female Prime Minister Portugal has ever had. She was in office for just 100 days, but left us a unique legacy of “caring for the future”. She said that there can be no democracy without equality.

Forty years later, having been through one of the most traumatic and uncertain periods in the history of mankind, we can say that not only can there be no democracy without equality, but that there can be no future without equality.

The future will be compromised if half of humanity does not actively participate in its construction, if women are not fully on board with the digital and climate transition and if their talents continue to be wasted.

This COVID crisis has affected women disproportionately. Women were the first to lose jobs and income. 70% of them have been on the front line, working in essential sectors such as health, education and social care.

Globally, it is estimated that more than 47 million women and girls have been pushed below the poverty threshold. And we cannot forget that 11 million girls have disappeared from formal education during the pandemic.

Last but not least, we cannot fail to mention the “Shadow Pandemic”, the tragedy of domestic violence, with many women and girls being forced to stay at home with their aggressors during lockdowns. It is estimated that for every three months of lockdown, more than 15 million women have been victims of domestic violence.

It is time to treat these injustices as a GLOBAL EMERGENCY that requires urgent action, to quote António Guterres. Time for Generation Equality to take the lead in creating a fairer world that leaves no one behind - a Marshall Plan for Equality. Time to dream of Europe as a place where women and girls feel in control of their lives, as Ursula von der Leyen said.

It is time to change the social destiny of half of humanity. If not now - when we have so much to recover, so many priorities to set, so many new measures to adopt, so many shortcuts to take - when?

“It is time to change the social destiny of half of humanity. If not now - when we have so much to recover, so many priorities to set, so many new measures to adopt, so many shortcuts to take - when?”
Mr Maduro, in your view, are the topics under discussion at the Conference on the Future of Europe the right ones, or would you say that there are other important issues that have been left out of the conversation?

To a large extent, we still don’t know what the answer to that question is. On the one hand, the list of topics basically encompasses almost anything that we could imagine and discuss about the EU. It is intentionally broad, so as to leave as much freedom as possible to the citizens’ panels to decide on what they believe to be really important.

On the other hand, we know that the presidency is going to select from among those proposals which will be the object of political deliberation. And so one of the issues is precisely how that filtering will be done. The most important topics will not simply be a function of what citizens (either through participation in the platform or through the citizens’ panels) decide is most important, but also of what the institutions, Member States and national governments will then decide is important. And we know that there is strong tension between institutions such as the European Parliament, which believe that the Conference should be open to treaty amendments, and the Council, which strongly opposes that possibility. Of course, whether treaty amendments are a possibility or not determines, to a large extent, the scope of what could come out of the Conference.

The second aspect is that the process itself, including this discussion, already highlights the deepest problem and challenge the Union faces. And that is that the EU is no longer capable of developing political mechanisms or forms of deliberation that can reconcile the different preferences we see around Europe on a variety of topics that matter.

We know, for instance, that there are very contrasting views on migration and on what the European Economic and Monetary Union should entail. But we don’t have the political instruments to reconcile them. So it always looks as if the Union is blocked.

I think there are two main problems that explain this, and that the origin is an asymmetry between where policies increasingly need to be defined. Through our interdependence, there are a growing number of areas where decisions need to be made at transnational level. But the way politics is framed is still deeply national. Basically, the European democratic deficit stems from the fact that national democracies have not incorporated the consequences of interdependence, and, because they haven’t, they then provide the wrong political incentives for our leaders at EU level.

So we have to work on two levels: Union politics and the reorganisation of EU policies.
Do you see this as part of the conversation on the Conference on the Future of Europe? Does the structure allow for that?

Partly yes. Take for instance the question of the Spitzenkandidat: the idea behind it is to make European elections relevant. And the way we promote more left/right politics in Europe, instead of simply politics that are for or against Europe, is by making the European Parliament elections the choice of political leadership in Europe. Whoever gets the majority in Parliament should become the leader of the executive, the President of the European Commission.

This is one way of reorganising European politics. Another one is through policies or EU resources.

I’ve been proposing the development of genuine EU own resources - EU-wide taxes, if you want - for many years. I think they are crucial for changing the way people think of the EU, because how you organise EU resources strongly shapes people’s ideas about what the Union should do and how much money it should have.

How? If the Union funds itself mostly through contributions from national budgets, then you create a zero-sum game at the level of the European Union because you’re basically saying that the Union is distributing money from the Member States. And that raises the issue of net beneficiaries and net contributors.

Instead, if you organise EU resources at the level of the EU through taxes that the EU applies to activities that in many instances can no longer be adequately and effectively taxed at national level, then the discussion will be about how to redistribute the wealth that is generated by the European Union itself.

“How you organise EU resources strongly shapes people’s ideas about what the Union should do and how much money it should have”

I conducted a study to test this statement, asking people in ten Member States two different sets of questions. The first one was simply: do you think the European Union should have more money and your Member State less money? Or the opposite? And there was a very strong difference between Southern, Northern and Central European countries, between net beneficiaries and net contributors in terms of the budget as it is currently constructed.

We then asked simply: do you think the European Union should have an EU-wide tax on CO₂ emissions, on digital companies, even on companies in general? And in every Member State, there was a majority in favour. So depending on how you framed how the Union was going to get its resources, you would get support for the European Union to have more resources or not.

The same is true for policies. One area where the EU added value is more obvious is the digital world, because individual Member States can no longer effectively regulate big tech companies. They simply have no regulatory power over transnational organisations like that. If an individual Member State, particularly a small or medium-sized country, tries to regulate Google or Facebook, they will simply say: “Well, if you try to impose that on us, we won’t accept it, and if necessary we won’t operate in your market”. The European Union, on the other hand, has the scale and size to bring its regulatory authority to bear.
When we look at the role of civil society in the Conference, the level of engagement in terms of figures seems to be very high. But what about the value of the content of civil society contributions?

The value of the content varies a lot, as you would expect from such wide participation: some contributions are very good, others less so.

I think the method chosen is a high-risk one. We know, for example, that if we organise referendums without any discussions, the risk of it being hijacked and manipulated is very high. But if, instead, you put in place a process whereby citizens first get knowledge and information and are obliged to listen to and discuss with each other, often the result of this deliberation is much better.

The idea behind deliberative assemblies such as this one is basically that if they involve citizens in this way, whatever will come out at the end will be more legitimate. It’s a matter of getting political capital for what is going to be done.

But the first difficulty is that deliberative assemblies as we know them are focused on one issue. In the case of the CoFoE, the citizens are given a blank page: you tell us what you want to decide on and then you make the proposals. Such an exercise is a lot more demanding, especially given the little time available. So the first risk is the extent to which it is really feasible to have a deliberative assembly model with such short deadlines and such a wide scope of potential issues.

The second challenge is that you may create expectations that you will not be able to meet. If, on the one hand, the Council says it wants no treaty amendment, but on the other, citizens that are supposed to represent all Europeans are told that they can decide whatever they think the Union should do, what do you think is going to happen? They are no legal experts; they are not going to care whether there is a treaty amendment involved or not. So if proposals emerge, but many of them are not endorsed by the institutions, the institutions are setting themselves up for more trouble than if they had done nothing in the first place, and I hope they have carefully thought through what’s going to happen at the end of the process.

The third issue is who participates. Opening up participation is very good in general, but of course those that are better organised and more easily mobilised participate more than others. So having mechanisms for open and direct participation doesn’t mean that all the interests will be fully represented. Those who are more active may end up having a louder voice in the process than others.

“If many of the proposals that emerge from the CoFoE are not endorsed by the institutions, the EU is setting itself up for more trouble than if nothing had been done in the first place, and I hope they have carefully thought through what’s going to happen at the end of the process”
Panel I: The health crisis and its impact on the future of Europe

Moderated by: Raquel Morão Lopes, Radio and Television of Portugal

Introduction by: Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers’ Group

Panel:

• Lorenzo Consoli, ASKA NEWS, Brussels correspondent
• Anniek de Ruijter, co-initiator of the European Health Union Manifesto initiative
• Isabelle Marchais, EU health expert at the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris
• Małgorzata Bonikowska, President of the Centre for International Relations, Poland

Discussion
We have come a very long way; the glass is more than half full

Before thinking about the future, let’s think about the present. Just imagine for a moment where we would be now if we didn’t have the vaccines, if the only remedy we had was still keeping people away from people. Imagine the stress, the pressure on our health systems and professionals.

Imagine, also, the state of our economy if we were still or again in lockdown, with shops closed, factories struggling to keep up production, tourism totally wiped out and hundreds of thousands of jobs lost. But we have managed to produce vaccines and the vaccines are a game-changer.

These vaccines didn’t come by some stroke of magic or luck, but thanks to decades of research and development and thanks to Europe’s strong legislative environment, which offered legal certainty for our health industry to undertake the necessary research and investments.

What has the pandemic shown us? That when we are faced with an extreme existential threat we can:

- effect change very quickly. This gives me hope that we will be able to undertake the changes needed to take on what is possibly the biggest challenge in front of us: climate change;
- find ways to cooperate between Member States, even in areas which were previously considered “no-go zones” like health. After an initial moment of disarray, the Member States began working on solutions together and they are still doing so.

It has also shown that disinformation is another huge threat that we have to grapple with. Too many people continue to take decisions based on misinformation and this is causing loss of life. Social media platforms need to be accountable for the content they carry. This may be controversial, but we cannot just tell them to be responsible; we need to put in place European legislation to hold them to account.

To conclude, I would like to share five key takeaways:

1. The EU, as an inter-institutional entity, has become more important than ever.
2. Europeans clearly expect the EU to protect their health. This might not have been an expectation before, but it clearly is now.
3. Investment in innovation and research must remain at the forefront of all our actions, not only in technology and manufacturing, but also in health and the protection of intellectual property. Uncertainty will lead to a loss of talent to other continents offering more certainty.
4. The current Treaties provide us with good scope for more cooperation, even in an area such as health where we previously thought there was none.
5. Information, communication and quality journalism need to become an integral part of all our actions. Independent and professional journalists who can provide reliable information are the front liners of the war on misinformation.

In a short time we have come a very long way. There is still a lot to do, but today I would say that the glass is more than half full.
We need to make health a shared competence for the EU

There are two aspects of the COVID crisis that the EU has handled successfully: the vaccination effort and the COVID certificate.

Interestingly, different legal bases have been used for decisions on these two issues. There was no legal basis for the vaccination effort. Article 4 of the Treaty on the functioning of the EU (TFUE) lists "common safety concerns in public health matters" among the areas of shared competence; however, Article 168 makes it clear that this competence is very limited and does not allow for a common health policy.

The solution found was a coordinated effort based on voluntary participation, with extensive cooperation between the Commission and the Member States. The Member States understood the gravity of the situation and saw that it was in their interest to cooperate with the Commission in order to have joint procurement contracts for vaccines for all, including the countries with less market clout.

The legal basis used for the COVID certificate, on the other hand, was Article 77 of the TFUE, which, interestingly, does not refer to health, but to the circulation of people within the EU. This legal basis made it possible to adopt a binding Regulation with direct effect throughout the EU, instead of relying on Member States' voluntary participation.

Looking at EU history, my concern is that once this clear understanding between the Member States is gone, the EU's capacity to act in this field will be stumped. And my conclusion is that we need to change the Treaties. I believe we now have the momentum to make health one of the shared competences of the EU, much like the single market, the environment and other policies.

Remember how many recommendations made by the EU in the past were ignored by the Member States? Take the Lisbon Agenda: based on the open method of coordination, which means voluntary participation, it was adopted in 2000 to make the EU the best knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, but by 2005 had been dropped as a failure. So, forget the voluntary cooperation method. It doesn't work. What works is binding measures based on the Treaty.

The Treaty needs to be changed not only as far as health is concerned, but also as regards industrial policy, which is an exclusive competence of the Member States. There is a lot of talk about strategic autonomy at the moment and the need to bring Europe's supply chains under EU control with no risk of China, India or any other country disrupting them. How can we achieve this strategic autonomy if we don't have a common industrial policy? And to have a common industrial policy we need to change the Treaty.

We need to modify Articles 168 (public health), 173 (industry), 4 and 6 (national and shared competences) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. The COVID crisis has opened up this new opportunity for European integration and provided momentum that we need to make the most of.

“My concern is that once this clear understanding between the Member States is gone, the EU’s capacity to act will be stumped. And my conclusion is that we need to change the Treaties to make health a shared competence”
What we need in the EU is health politics

In the past, EU involvement in the field of health has been very much crisis-driven and a spillover from other policy areas, such as regulating the milk market to deal with bovine tuberculosis.

Coming after several other health crises, COVID-19 opens up a window of opportunity for legal change, and we should use it to make the EU more relevant for people. One thing that clearly is relevant is health.

Health is politically sensitive; it involves a lot of money and political capital, so it is logical for Member States to resist giving away power in this area. And yet, whenever there is a crisis, we also see clearly that, together, we could solve problems more easily.

We have seen that it is not essential for the law to change in order for the EU to adopt health laws and policy. We were able to purchase vaccines together and there is a large body of EU health law and policy without an actual legal basis. Why then would we still want a Treaty change?

We at the Gastein Forum see the European Commission’s proposal for a European Health Union as, once again, very much crisis-driven. We’re looking at emergency powers for the ECDC, EMA and the Commission itself. HERA is all about preparedness for the next pandemic. But is that really what a European Health Union should be about? Is what binds us together not, rather, our common understanding of solidarity, the idea of universal healthcare and the importance we attach to having access to prevention, mental health, health literacy, etc.?

A European Health Union should be much more holistic and focused on the resilience of healthcare systems. Do we need more power at the EU level to have this holistic health union? No, what we need is health politics, and that has two components: one is budgets, and the other is a constitutional basis to create a political discussion about health.

When you look at the national level, you see that health politics is in the hands of the health experts, who are crucial to the political discussions about what policy choices to make and that creates a lot of legitimacy. But in the EU, it is rather in the hands of internal market professionals. As a result, the people in charge of implementation keep resisting the EU laws passed by their counterparts in the market, enterprise, and employment sectors.

Therefore, the most important reason to change the Treaty would be to create a forum for political discussion around health engaging the national health authorities, something which right now is not possible. A paradoxical result could be that we would see less EU law and policy, and less of an inroad into the very sensitive and expensive policy area that is health in the Member States.

“...the most important reason to change the Treaty would be to create a forum for political discussion around health engaging the national health authorities, something which right now is not possible.”
HERA is a real step forward

The troubles we experienced when the health crisis broke out showed the importance of solidarity, joint action and mutual assistance between Member States. But the crisis also highlighted a number of gaps in Europe in preventing and fighting pandemics – lack of information and data, of common indicators and financial resources, particularly for “high-risk” research, with no guarantee of return on investment; of coordination in clinical trial research and of transparency on product stocks, medical equipment and, more broadly, production.

Several proposals have recently been put forward which frame a new EU system of preparedness and response to health crises. They include a beefed-up mandate and resources for the European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, together with a new European authority for preparedness and response to health threats, HERA.

HERA is a real step forward. While not pretending to duplicate the USA’s BARDA, whose mandate includes defence expertise, it will enable the EU to prepare for, and respond quickly to, multiple health threats – epidemics but also chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and other threats.

Expected to be fully operational by 2022, its funding is estimated at around EUR 30 billion over the 2022-2027 period, and will also leverage public and private financing nationally with different instruments, loans, guarantees and equity.

HERA will act both upstream, with preventive measures, and downstream, with emergency measures in crises. Its mission covers a wide range of tasks: strengthening coordination, assessing threats, collecting intelligence, developing models and supporting research.

It will also address EU vulnerabilities and dependencies in terms of strategic products to build an integrated system that will allow intervention at all stages – development, production, acquisition, stock-taking and stockpiling, up to the deployment of treatment, medical devices and equipment.

In order to achieve these results, HERA will systematically monitor supply chains to identify and prevent bottlenecks and shortages. It will map production capacities and develop industrial partnerships. It will also try to put in place flexible production capacities to use when needed. Finally, as soon as a public health emergency is declared at EU level, HERA will step in in terms of decision-making, production research, funding and possibly joint purchasing.

This new structure will, however, require vigilance. We may have to improve its governance, transparency and accountability. While partnerships with industry are key, attention needs to be paid to dialogue with civil society, including patients, caregivers and hospitals. We must also ensure that it is not funded at the expense of actions such as disease prevention or strengthening health systems. So its budget may need to be topped up with innovative financing, including private-public partnerships.

“While not pretending to duplicate the USA’s BARDA, HERA will enable the EU to prepare for, and respond quickly to, multiple health threats – epidemics but also chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and other threats”
Health has become a strategic area for the EU

As a political scientist, I would stress that health is no longer a topic to discuss among healthcare experts, but has become a strategic area for the EU. This is a sea change, which makes things sometimes easier, sometimes more complicated, because it links health with international affairs and security – an area where the EU is not as strong a player compared to where market issues are concerned.

We very often hear the COVID-19 crisis being described as a Hamiltonian moment for the EU. Certainly the issuing of joint debt was a milestone in our history. But I would also call this a Lincolnian moment. Let me remind you that there came a time in the history of the USA when disagreement between the states flared into all-out war. Today, Lincoln is the most revered U.S. president because he was able to keep the country together through that war, and paid a very high price for what he did.

The EU is now a large group of 27 countries, which is very difficult to manage. Just imagine a family dinner with 27 people around the table: you wouldn’t even be able to follow what they were saying! Each country also varies in age in terms of years as EU members – Poland and Hungary are 17, but others have been a part of the EU for 30 or 50 years. If I may compare this to the family again – we know that the teen years can be difficult, thus it is important to have strategic patience on that front. At the same time, the senior family members always know better – this is not easy either.

Although all countries are legally bound by the Treaties, sometimes their actions fly in the face of the law. Solidarity was one of the words participants in the seminar said they associated most closely with the EU, but the impression we get is that there hasn’t been much of it between the Member States of late – the migration crisis was a case in point.

Only interest can keep together such a disparate group of countries. We can only go as far as the Member States see it as being in their interest to go, and that’s exactly what the pandemic has shown: we managed to coordinate some policies and actions because the Member States wanted it, and they wanted it not out of generosity, but because they felt it was in their best interest and that there was no alternative.

My argument is that, because everybody agrees on the need for deeper coordination in health matters, the European Health Union could be used as a pilot project to find new ways to stick together over and above our differences. It is as a strategic attempt to rally countries around something where there is relative consensus on the need for unity.

Health has also become part of the conversation about European “strategic autonomy”, which is no longer a military concept. Instead, it’s about how we see Europe as an actor on the global scene, especially vis-à-vis Russia or China but also the USA. So my second take is that security has to be understood in a much broader sense today, which includes response to “demographic weapons”, like the developments we are witnessing on the eastern border, but also biological weapons, such as a pandemic.

We live in a hybrid world with hybrid threats, which may require hybrid answers, and dealing with health as part of a wider discussion about our security goes in this direction.
Panel II: A stronger economy, social justice and jobs – What’s Europe got to do with it?

Moderated by: Mónica Silvares, ECO - Economia online

Introduction by: Oliver Röpke, President of the EESC Workers’ Group

Panel:

- Francesco Corti, associate research fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)
- Michael Sauga, Brussels correspondent for Der Spiegel
- Xenia Kounalaki, head of Kathimerini’s foreign news desk
- Susana Peralta, associate professor at the Lisbon Nova School of Business and Economics

Discussion
Progress on social policy requires clear commitments at EU level

Just 10 or 15 years ago there was a strong belief that social policy was purely a national competence, and that Europe should only deal with the single market. However, the latest European barometer surveys show that citizens also expect Europe to be active and intervene in social policies. This is why we now discuss how Europe should be involved in social policy, not whether it should be involved at all, as used to be the case.

Europe has reacted much better to this health and economic crisis than it did to previous crises. For example, we are reminded of the Troika policy after the financial crisis. Many countries really suffered from the measures introduced at that time; some have still not recovered from the cuts in their social protection and pension systems, or from minimum wage cuts.

This time we did much better as the European Union. We had measures based on solidarity instead of austerity. We have the NextGenerationEU programme. We had the SURE programme, where it was also symbolically highly important for Europe to support countries financially in order to keep people in employment.

The Commission has just kick-started the process on how to revise spending rules in Europe. We cannot afford to lose any time – the general escape clause for the Stability and Growth Pact will expire soon. The green and digital transitions will bring huge challenges and will not be possible without changing the spending rules of the Stability and Growth Pact.

In political terms, we have to overcome the mistrust between the Member States, between rich and less rich countries, between East and West. I think we really have to establish more trust and rules that everyone can respect. Necessary investments in the green, digital and social transition must be made possible.

We are also seeing a certain political momentum in favour of a more social Europe. The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 was a historical moment. I think it was also a game changer within the EU and has since served not only as a compass but also as a strong political commitment.

We now have to deliver on the EPSR. In this respect, the Social Summit in Porto in May 2021 was also a milestone moment because it brought together all stakeholders to agree that the EPSR must be implemented.

Social policy is still a national matter and we should work on social policy in all Member States, but without clear commitments at the European level, we will not make the necessary progress.

Working people want a Europe that delivers; they want decent wages and decent working conditions. The proposals such as the Minimum Wage Directive are a step in the right direction and we should continue to move in this direction.

In the long term, we should readjust the relationship between the economic freedoms in the single market on one hand and fundamental social rights, including trade union rights, on the other hand.

Subordinating social rights to economic freedoms is no longer acceptable. We want to change this through a social progress protocol in the Treaties. This may not be feasible right away, but I was quite surprised that this demand was one of those most supported by citizens at the Conference on the Future of Europe.
All eyes on Europe: the EU must have a strong role in social policy

The future of social policy is a question of survival for the European Union. Let’s approach this from the Portuguese perspective:

• In Portugal, some 10% of people who work still fall below the poverty threshold. There are 22% of workers without permanent labour contracts, which makes Portugal one of the EU’s labour markets with the strongest duality. It is the younger generations with medium levels of education who work without labour contracts and who fail to qualify for the comfortable side of the labour market, which enjoys labour rights. Older generations tend to have permanent contracts as they joined the labour market in earlier decades when the problem of duality was less pronounced;

• The chances of in-work poverty increase with each additional child a working family may have. Around 19% of Portuguese children are poor and almost one-third of children have experienced poverty in the past four years. This creates huge inequalities in the education system, negatively reflecting on students’ grades. Portugal is hardly an exception and similar problems are encountered in several peripheral economies across Europe, in southern Europe in particular;

• The Portuguese average wage is quite low. The minimum wage amounts to only EUR 700 a month, which is 65% of the country’s median wage;

• The minimum income scheme in Portugal is very restrictive, conditional and modest, amounting to no more than EUR 200 per month.

This is why social policy must be a European issue. The EU must help the Member States and devise policies that will be coordinated towards addressing the problem of poverty. Otherwise, there is not much sense in having free mobility of workers, capital, goods and services and not having some sort of centralised redistributive policy.

There are transfers going from the EU to all Member States, but they are not enough. There are huge disparities between Portugal and Sweden in terms of what it means to be poor. If you look at Bulgaria or Romania, the absolute poverty levels are just outrageous when measured in terms of material deprivation. Living standards across Europe and within countries differ considerably. Portugal’s debt level is such that it is risky to spend more on social issues. This is why it needs Europe to step in.

How can this be solved? The Portuguese social insurance system is fundamentally broken because it relies on an outdated concept of work which relies on the idea that people contribute on the basis of their earnings. This works only for people on the good side of the market, i.e. those enjoying workers’ rights. So those 22% of Portuguese workers without a contract face more risk. This risk has to be spread in other ways, by expanding the funding basis. Just having contributions from labour earnings will no longer do the job.

Transition will also take its toll, hitting those that are not protected by social insurance schemes the most. We need to detach social insurance from the labour market as much as possible.

As for minimum income, we need European coordination in order to make sure everyone in need is covered. We also need a way to collect income taxes, for which we need redistribution at the European level. Otherwise, this will not be possible due to tax competition.
EU proposal on minimum wages cannot deliver

Following the introduction of minimum wages, Germany had very good results and saw no rise in unemployment. However, I’m not convinced that it is up to the European Commission and the EU to achieve such a result and to interfere with national policies and with the competences of governments and national collective bargaining partners in particular.

Here is why:

• numerical targets set by the Commission are far too general to do justice to different social and collective bargaining circumstances and the situation on the ground. For example, the Belgian minimum wage in gross terms is well below the mark. According to the Commission, it is around 50%, but in net terms, it is one of the highest in Europe at around 70% because of the fiscal tax system and levies. On the other hand, France has a minimum wage of about 61% in gross terms, but in net terms it has only 64% because of its high taxes. This shows that the EU benchmark may produce false results without the inclusion of national tax and social security systems.

• in some countries trade unions reject the EU initiative, not because they are against minimum wages, but because they fear for their sovereignty in setting wage levels. For example, Denmark and Sweden have the highest wages and the best collective bargaining coverage in Europe, but now they fear that the EU will not strengthen but rather will weaken their position. This should give Brussels some food for thought.

• from an economic point of view, the European Monetary Union has made it impossible for Member States to compensate for macroeconomic imbalances through devaluation. We can no longer devalue our national currencies and we have to find other adjustments. This can be achieved through more transfers in Europe, but on the other hand, we need the adjustment of prices and wages, without which the monetary union will not function. I very much agree that we had too much austerity during the euro crisis, and too few transfers, too little macroeconomic policy and too few macroeconomic counter measures. But without the adjustment of prices and wages, this currency union will not work. In this regard, rigid minimum wage rules are a problem.

• Europe has declared social and labour market policy to be a national matter and it is important to leave it there because Europe needs more macroeconomic integration, not a standardisation of social systems.

We have so many problems in Europe because we are not harmonising things that should be harmonised. Before trying to integrate social systems, we need more tax harmonisation. We now have countries competing to have the lowest corporate and income taxes.

For example, Shell has moved to London because in the UK they enjoy some tax advantages which they could not have in the Netherlands. We have this kind of competition in many fields. The countries in Europe are trying to attract corporations with tax preferences, thereby initiating a race to the bottom.

A lot of tax schemes are attracting rich people from all over the continent to their countries with tax preferences. This is a social problem because it undermines the needed solidarity in Europe. It is these topics and problems that we need to fix.

“We have countries competing to have the lowest corporate taxes and tax schemes attracting rich people from abroad with tax preferences. This undermines the needed solidarity in Europe!”

Michael Sauga
Brussels correspondent for Der Spiegel
Social investments should be accompanied by ambitious reforms

The European Pillar of Social Rights is serving as a benchmark for the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs). But how will the Member States be using the funds from these plans for social expenditure? If we look at the national plans submitted so far, we have on average 30% of the expenditure allocated to social spending, which amounts to a total of around EUR 150 billion. There will be investments in skills, healthcare, childcare, work/life balance and social housing.

The CEPS is preparing a study which explores what we can realistically expect from these social investments. We also probe their additionality: are the Member States using this money just to cover expenditure that was already planned or continue previously existing programmes? Or are they investing in new social needs?

When assessing the social dimension of these plans, we also examine whether the public funds spent are meant to be effective in the long term. If we want to assess what to realistically expect from the NRRPs beyond the numbers and beyond the labels, we really have to look at how the money is spent and whether it is accompanied by relevant reforms.

Some Member States, such as Italy and Belgium, use a large portion of their social spending for additional public investment on which we might expect higher returns in terms of employment and growth. On the other hand, in Germany, the money allocated via the NRRPs will be used to cover projects that were already planned.

Although the Member States can spend the money however they want and are not obliged to spend it on new investments, the estimates of the macro impact of the plan are based on the assumption that this expenditure will be additional public spending.

As for the reforms, let’s take the example of Italy.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, Italy’s social situation was very bad. The share of working poor in Italy was high at around 12 percent. The key problems of the Italian labour market are low work intensity, a very low employment rate compared to other countries, but a high share of involuntary part-time work and temporary work.

Italian wages are low. This is due to a weak bargaining system that is protecting only one part of the workforce. The other problem is the high level of taxation. Low work intensity and low wages are actually not fully addressed in the reforms accompanying the recovery plan.

Italy is going to invest a lot of money in the labour market, and it will launch new employment and national skills guarantees. Altogether it will invest around EUR 5 billion in activation policy, in particular in public employment services.

But are we going to reform the public employment service in Italy, which has many problems, especially in terms of territorial inequalities and an inability to reach out to people in need? The big, new investment in activation policy will not actually be accompanied by an equally ambitious reform of the active labour market policy.

Another important prerequisite is to involve the social partners and key stakeholders in the process of selecting reforms and designing policies. Otherwise, the risk is that high ambitions for a socially inclusive recovery will not be met by an adequate response.
COVID-19: a crisis that restored Greek faith in the EU

Greece suffered staggering losses during the debt crisis in the 2000s. Within 10 years, a quarter of the country’s GDP vanished and youth unemployment rose to over 60%. The future of an entire generation capsized with many young Greeks leaving for abroad, albeit this time not, as in previous generations, due to political persecution, but rather due to a deliberate economic policy that tried to correct three decades of overspending.

That is not to say that Greeks were not to blame for their own destiny; however, the remedy was far too harsh. It was a near-death experience, the equivalent of a hospital patient being given lethal doses by fellow EU Member States claiming to be its doctor. And yet, despite all the trauma, Greece survived and is now recovering, mainly thanks to record tourist numbers. Foreign investment is trickling in. Unemployment has fallen to 13%.

The COVID crisis was in almost every way the exact opposite of the financial crisis. Europe set a self-confident, productive role for Greece. The Greek health system looked up to Germany on how to minimise hospitalisations, and to Portugal on how to maximise vaccination rates. European assistance staved off a new Greek recession and the EU Recovery Fund prompted many Greeks who had left during the crisis to return; many for the first time in their adult lives.

In other words, the Greek people have regained some trust in the EU. This was not merely a crisis in which the EU could lead by example; it was a crisis Greece could have never handled alone. We needed Europe. It was obvious. We are now at a crucial point in our relationship with Europe: whether this model that benefits Greece can be continued.

Young, well-educated Greeks who are now coming back have several university degrees and speak a handful of languages. They have a cosmopolitan worldview and a range of professional skills. They can enrich our culture. They start new businesses. They can also give new blood to our politics. A generation free from the corruption and nepotism of their parents’ generation.

This youth knows what it wants from Greece. It is not “300 days of sunshine a year” or “Live your myth in Greece” or any of the other clichés that are peddled about their homeland. They want decent salaries, affordable rents, and a European welfare state that respects labour and human rights. They want a viable pension system, free access to a good public health system, a respectable education, and most of all, they want to raise a family in Greece.

Europe can guide us still further: Greece is still on Europe’s periphery, and not just geographically. We have inadequate LGBTQ rights and gender inequality, with one of the highest rates of femicide. These are not problems we can solve without a Europe that insists on a more empathetic Greece. I also hope for an EU that could be crucial in helping Greece to unlock its vast potential for wind farms and solar panels, enabling it to become a global leader in green energy.

People in Greece often ask me, given our country’s bleak experience over the last 20 years, if we need less of the EU. No, I tell them. I think we need more of the EU, but the right one.
Opening session

Opening speech: Cillian Lohan, EESC Vice-President for Communication

Information talk:

- Ana Rita Moura, European Parliament
  *The structure of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the citizens’ panels*
The way forward is through dialogue

In the summer of 2020, during a summit that has gone down as the longest in EU history, Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa gave German premier Angela Merkel the novel Blindness, by Portuguese Nobel Prize winning writer José Saramago, for her birthday. The book tells the story of an individual waking up one morning at a city traffic light to find he has gone blind. And suddenly, this blindness spreads through the city, creating chaos and panic, and very quickly societal structures break down.

I see the story very much as a reflection of what has been happening in our society over the last 18 months but also, on a smaller scale, many other times. The pandemic has been a large-scale occurrence of the sort of breakdown that we see in the book - a breakdown of normality so to speak.

The lesson as I see it is that, in times of extraordinary crises, when the environment we live in is changing and trouble comes, everyone has an individual battle to fight, a choice to make on how to behave in the face of adversity. It can be very easy to do the right thing when everything is fine and the support structures around you help you do the right thing. It’s much more difficult to do the right thing, and even be clear in yourself what the right thing to do is, when everything around you is moving in a different direction. And that’s where I see the huge power of individuals.

I think all of us, looking at different times and moments in history as we grew up, have thought: “how would I have behaved if I had been there?”. And we naturally tend to presume that we would have done the right thing and been the one fighting for justice, truth and integrity. But the reality is often very different when we have to juggle different responsibilities and balance different views on how things can go forward. Living through a crisis like COVID has been a privilege, in a way. It’s been a chance to see how we are truly going to behave, take responsibility and look after others who are more vulnerable than us, and how much we are willing to give up to protect the greater good.

It’s important for us to remember how quickly things can change. As in Blindness, change can happen in the blink of an eye and it’s easy to forget, as time moves on, how things were. Because things change quickly, we have to adapt quickly. We discussed the power of being able to use our common financial interests to leverage change in different Member States and how that's often held up as a means to force action in the right direction. But looking to my own area of expertise, the environment, where that tool has been available for a number of years, we can see it doesn't always work. Imposing fines, threatening withdrawal of funding doesn't always create the change we would hope to see.

That’s part of the challenge we face. But whatever we do and however we progress, I think the most important thing is to keep talking, gathering and sharing ideas and exchanging experiences. The fact that we have the Conference on the Future of Europe as a mechanism to come together, share opposing views and find a way forward is really important.

“Having the Conference on the Future of Europe as a mechanism to come together, share opposing views and find a way forward is really important”

Cillian Lohan
EESC Vice-President for Communication
Panel III – European democracy - How can we buttress press freedom in Europe against looming multiple threats?

Moderated by: Bruno Kaufmann, global democracy correspondent at SWI swissinfo.chn

Introduction by: Séamus Boland, President of the EESC Diversity Europe Group

Panel:

- Matthew Caruana Galizia, director and co-founder, Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation
- Julie Majerczak, head of Brussels office, Reporters without Borders
- Anthony Bellanger, secretary general of the International Federation of Journalists
- Andrzej Stankiewicz, political correspondent, deputy editor-in-chief of ONET.PL
- Márton Kárpáti, journalist, Hungarian news portal TELEX
- Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová, journalist, SME, Slovakia

Discussion
The need to protect journalists and journalism

Journalists today face two fundamental challenges: physical, verbal and legal threats (in some cases even loss of life), and threats to their livelihood and the need to align themselves with the owners of the newspapers for which they work, in a world where monopolies are increasingly beginning to form.

The fact that in the EU 16 journalists have been murdered since 2015 is astonishing. You would think this would happen in countries where law and order don’t matter. But as we can see, law and order are susceptible to fragile times, even in the EU.

Clearly journalists are more vulnerable and thus need more protection than other citizens. The question to ask is: are they being protected as they need to be?

Looking at the way forward, the EESC has produced an opinion on Securing media freedom and diversity in Europe. The EESC’s starting point is that we must agree that the EU has a moral obligation to enforce EU values, ensure functioning liberal democracies and protect the rule of law.

Some of the key recommendations look at how to ensure the media literacy of our population and how to make it a part of our education systems. We cannot just expect people to acquire it naturally. We need to find ways to teach and bring knowledge to all young people who have to deal with today’s multifaceted media platform.

Another key recommendation is a ban on strategic lawsuits against public participation, otherwise known as SLAPPs. These aim to censor, intimidate or silence media through legal costs or simply fear. This mechanism should have no place in the European Union if we truly believe in freedom.

We also recommend that the EU support impartial national public broadcasting companies, and that it incentivise the creation of national transparency registers, for example on contacts between politicians and media entrepreneurs.

And finally, it is recommended that future European Commission annual reports on the rule of law in Member States automatically include a section on the state of media freedom and diversity.

We hope that this opinion will begin a discussion on how to ensure the kind of media freedom we need in order to make important decisions in our lives, such as deciding for whom we vote and for what values we stand.

In closing, I would like to express two aspirations.

The first is that journalism in Europe be valued and supported for what it is: a public good. And if it’s a public good, then it must have the necessary support to create public good.

The second is that greater media protection and diversity become a focal point for discussions and recommendations within the Conference of the Future of Europe.
The use of SLAPPs to silence journalists

Looking back to the last few years of my mother’s life, it seems like her murder was entirely predictable. The threats against her were increasing as she got closer to the truth about the corruption she was investigating in Malta in connection with energy and privatisation deals. By the time she was murdered, almost 50 strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) had been filed against her – 19 of them by a single business figure.

These defamation suits are intended not just to stop one journalist, but also to deter other journalists from investigating something. This actually works, because investigative journalists do not really work individually today, but in collaborative groups or in editorial solidarity, with one journalist publishing a report and others taking it forward or backing it up with their own investigative work.

While this legal harassment against her mounted, public institutions were not prepared to do anything about it. The EU was aware of what was happening in Malta, but simply considered it an annoying little matter of national concern and not really a threat to European democracy. After my mother’s murder, we sent a message to Commission officials saying that if this did not stop it would spread to the rest of Europe. And in fact SLAPPs are now being used to silence journalists in Poland, Croatia, Slovenia, and across the entire EU.

Since the murder, my family and I have embarked on a campaign for justice to make sure that those who ordered and those who executed the murder are convicted, to not only vindicate her investigations – something we are far from achieving due to inadequacies in the way corruption is investigated and prosecuted in Malta, in other Member States and at European level – but also to ensure that no other journalist in Europe shares her fate.

Unfortunately, only a few months after my mother’s death, Ján Kuciak and his fiancée were murdered in Slovakia and it was then that European institutions really began to take note. Now, as a result of the campaign we’re working on with other international NGOs like the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Article 19, I believe European institutions are finally on the same page.

But we are still a long way from making legal harassment of journalists and activists impossible. National authorities across the European Union are not well placed to fight cross-border crime and corruption. We see this in the extremely low frequency with which cases like these are prosecuted while journalists expose corruption, money laundering, and cross-border organised crime over and over again.

“We are still a long way from making legal harassment of journalists and activists impossible”
Matthew Caruana Galizia: Investigative journalism is more efficient than crime investigators

Collaboration has increased the effectiveness of journalism in general. In the past, journalists worked mostly on their own. Each had their own sources and guarded them very closely. Collaboration was also structurally difficult when data could not be shared through the internet.

If a source came to you with a box full of documents, you would have had to photocopy them and send them to different journalists around Europe. This is what happened, for instance, with the Pentagon Papers, but it’s not very practical. Now journalists have tools that make it easy to communicate and share information effectively across borders.

Unfortunately, public authorities have not caught up, and the tools they have to collaborate in investigating crime are stuck in Victorian times. Police forces wanting to exchange evidence need to send a derogation letter to other police forces and fill out forms. There’s also lot of mistrust between police forces.

National authorities and policy-makers have a lot to learn from the way investigative journalists do their work. Unfortunately, because we have become so effective, we are the ones who are targeted. There is no need to target police officers, judges or prosecutors because they are simply less effective than journalists. So the burden and the threat of violent reprisals fall on our shoulders.
Press freedom in the EU

Having independent, free and rigorous journalism is absolutely essential and even consubstantial to democracy. If journalists are no longer free to play their role as the watchdog of democracy, there is no limit to political and economic power. The door is open to all abuse, corruption and arbitrariness.

While it is true that the EU remains the safest region in the world for media professionals, it is crucial to stress that journalists face increasing threats and hurdles even within the EU. The murders of Daphne Caruana Galizia and Ján Kuciak, but also more recently those of Giorgos Karaivaz and Peter R. de Vries, were the most shocking cases. But the truth is that journalists are subjected to multiple threats – intimidation, pressure, verbal and physical violence, online harassment, judicial harassment, SLAPPs, arrests, arbitrary detentions and illegal surveillance.

In some countries there is an unprecedented degree of control over the media. In Hungary (and also in Poland) public media is becoming a propaganda tool for the ruling party. Private media are bought by oligarchs close to the government, strangled financially, or denied a licence when it comes up for renewal. The situation is also particularly worrying in Bulgaria, which fared the worst in the EU in the latest RSP press freedom report, ranking 112th out of 180 countries globally.

If we want Europe to remain the region that best guarantees press freedom, the EU cannot stand back and do nothing. It must act, first by condemning attacks on journalists, but above all it must equip itself with the right tools.

The Commission is slowly becoming aware of the problem and has introduced two new tools to deal with it. For the first time, it has included press freedom in the annual report on the rule of law, which is expected to be followed by country-by-country recommendations. It is a welcome step, and one for which the RSF has been calling for a long time. But a more crucial step must be taken: there need to be sanctions when recommendations are not implemented and press freedom continues to be violated.

The Commission has also adopted recommendations on journalist safety which were published in mid-September. Another welcome step, but again, these are recommendations which are left to the goodwill of Member States to implement. Only binding acts can help improve journalists’ situation in practice.

Two other initiatives have also been announced: the first being anti-SLAPP measures at EU level for 2022. This is very important because SLAPPs are cross-border in nature, however national cases still make up the majority and this needs to be taken into account.

The second initiative is the European Media Freedom Act, which was also confirmed in the State of the Union address. In our view, this is a unique opportunity to tackle the problems we cannot solve today because the EU does not have the right tools. This time, the Commission really needs to be ambitious and go for binding acts.

To conclude, we have to defend information before we are deprived of it.

“The European Media Freedom Act is a unique opportunity to tackle the problems we cannot solve today because the EU does not have the right tools. This time, the Commission really needs to be ambitious and go for binding acts”
Press freedom in wider Europe and the world at large

The situation of journalists in the world at large is catastrophic, with 65 journalists murdered globally in 2021.

Mexico is the most dangerous of all countries, especially for reporters investigating corruption. But we must never forget India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where our team is working hard to exfiltrate colleagues who are directly threatened.

The Council of Europe has spearheaded efforts to make journalism safer and has teamed up with the IFJ, the European Federation of Journalists and NGOs like RSF to create a real working tool to monitor what is happening in its 47 Member States, which includes Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

As a result, we know that 33 journalists have been killed across the Council of Europe area since 2015 and 113 are currently in jail, which makes it the largest journalist prison in the world.

In most cases, when the Council of Europe questions the government of the country concerned – about the state of an enquiry and what is being done to put in place a journalist protection system and fight impunity – it gets either no answer or some very unsatisfactory response. Impunity is in fact the gangrene that is nibbling away at our trade.

Since 2015, the IFJ and other member organisations of the consortium for the Council of Europe have issued 1,069 alerts ranging from murder or imprisonment through threats to the safety and physical integrity of journalists, to media freedom deterrents such as revealing sources, and financial pressures. Of these, only 546 received some kind of response from governments. In 168 cases, that is to say 15% of the overall figure, our action has led to a resolution.

This is a scandal. It is the duty of democratic countries that are members of the Council of Europe to prosecute proved violations of press freedom. As an international organisation, we do not have the means to fight the violence. We can alert, champion free speech and speak out for trade union rights as such. But we can’t force governments to launch investigations. So there must be political responsibility, and at some point there must be binding sanctions too.

We have heard the Presidents of the European Commission and European Parliament speak fervently about this issue – even recently. But in our view, the only solution that would work at European level is to hit the wallet. States that are found guilty of human rights violations by the European Court of Human Rights get fined and have to pay that fine. We should do the same for free speech and press freedom.

Looking beyond the Council of Europe, we at the IFJ have proposed that impunity should end once and for all at international level as well. With our 190 global trade unions, we are working for the adoption of a UN convention for the protection and safety of journalists.

To conclude, press freedom can never be taken for granted and must be upheld day after day. Failure to prosecute a journalist murder sends the message that there will never be justice, and that journalists investigating crimes will meet the same fate.
Press freedom in Slovakia

I used to work for RTS public radio and television in Slovakia. I worked there for approximately six years. RTS’ general directors are appointed by the Parliament and are usually pretty docile, but the one who was in office during most of my time there was something of an anomaly. On his watch we managed to build trust and credibility as a news service, together with independence, which is rarely welcomed by politicians. When his five-year term came to an end, the Parliament appointed a new director who very quickly started to favour one governing party and to give credence to some conspiracy theories.

For instance, after the death of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée he was seriously asking if the protests that were sparked in the country were organised by George Soros. He also changed the management, and for several months we were in permanent conflict with our editors and bosses who were bullying us. Gradually, we realised that this did not bode well for our work.

I was a TV news anchor and chief political correspondent but would be sent to cover theatre and opera premieres instead of parliamentary sessions, and this caused a lot of tension. But we were a good, united team and held out for several months, until the general director fired four journalists and brought in four new ones that were willing to toe the line. Eventually, it became clear that we could no longer do our job in the company and that we would have to leave.

Some 15 of us quit, releasing a critical statement and a critical video on the day of the announcement, and since then 40 journalists have left RTS. The establishment of a new government a year and a half ago raised hopes of a system change, but it seems that the next director general will probably be appointed by the Parliament again, which is a sad story.

From this experience I would draw the following lessons.

1. It is naïve to expect a change of system from a change of government.

2. If you are a journalist working for a public broadcaster in a Visegrád country, it is important to be prepared to fight a legal battle. We had lawyers on our side, we joined unions because in Slovakia unionised workers cannot legally be fired. However, you must also be ready to fight for your cause on social media.

3. The support of other media is crucial. We were hugely bolstered by fellow journalists working for privately-owned media in Slovakia, and their backing meant a lot to us. That is one reason why we should protect not only public- but also privately-owned media. The second is that while we lost our battle, private TV is still there and plays an important role in informing the country.

“If you are a journalist working for a public broadcaster in a Visegrád country it is important to be prepared to fight a legal battle, but you must also be ready to fight for your cause on social media”
Press freedom in Poland

To fully understand the media situation in Poland you need quite a lot of background.

Poland has been ruled by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party since 2015. Its leader Jarosław Kaczyński has, for many years, had a vision to remodel the country with one basic goal: to extend the power of the ruling party, which by now controls everything from the smallest local institution to the Constitutional Tribunal and state-owned companies.

Poland is still, to some degree, a rural country where TV is the main source of information, and like many democracies suffers from a lack of media literacy where many do not possess the ability to decode propaganda. It has three television channels.

The first is state-owned TVP, where Kaczyński’s control is brutal. TVP has been hijacked to the service of fierce propaganda, portraying the opposition and independent media as actors working against Polish national interests.

The second TV channel is in the hands of a very wealthy Polish businessman, who also owns many companies in regulated sectors such as telecommunications, banking and energy. The ruling party has many ways to pressure him, as can be seen in his channel’s news coverage.

The third station, TVN, is critical of the government and is owned by the US giant Discovery. A few months ago the government decided to hit it through a law which would make it impossible for countries outside the European Economic Area to own Polish media. Jarosław Kaczyński justified the move by saying that the country was fighting a hybrid war in which suspicious Russian, Chinese and Arab companies, and possibly even South American drug cartels, could buy media in Poland. However, the only outlet concerned by the bill was US-owned TVN. The initiative failed because of conflicts inside the ruling camp itself.

As for print media, there are still independent outlets in Poland. First and foremost is the Gazeta Wyborcza, the largest Polish daily critical of the government, which provides quality journalism. Like other critical outlets, it has been deprived of the revenues of public advertising from state-owned Polish utilities.

Independent media are also denied interviews by PiS leading politicians, who do not answer questions at press conferences or those which are officially submitted in writing.

Local media capture is also an issue. The biggest state-controlled fuel company has bought most of Poland’s 20 regional newspapers, including their digital editions, which altogether have a readership of 17 million people out of a total population of 38 million. This makes the state oil company the biggest news provider in the country.

I don’t have any remedies to solve these problems, but I believe that democracy is a gentlemen’s agreement, and we need to find ways to deal with players who break this agreement after winning democratic elections. In my view, protecting journalism, teaching people how to handle propaganda, and regulating social media with its crazy algorithms that spread hatred are three key things we need to do.
**Press freedom in Hungary**

The media situation in Hungary is very similar to that in Poland. In the RSF World Press Freedom Index, Hungary now ranks 92nd, down from 10th 15 years ago. No journalists have been killed yet, but some have been threatened and bullied.

I used to work at Index, which was Hungary’s most influential news site with 1.5 million readers daily. Then businessmen close to the government got on the board. One day our editor-in-chief was fired, and the whole 90-strong staff quit in protest.

A month later we started our own news website, Telex. We crowdsourced the money to launch it and people responded massively, giving one million euros in just a few weeks. All our team, which is made up of some 70 people, came from Index. We are independent and make our own editorial decisions.

The biggest problem for independent journalists in Hungary is accessing information. As in Poland, we don't get answers from government officials or invitations to government press conferences, and this makes our work very hard.

The ruling party, which has been in power for 12 years, has a two-third majority in Parliament. The leader has given no interviews to independent or critical news outlets for over 13 years, and most government officials down to secretaries follow the same line. So mainly the only chance we have to ask them questions is when we chase them on the street with microphones and cameras. We don't get answers, but at least we can ask questions.

We have the same propaganda system as in Poland, with public service media getting €300 million a year only to disseminate government propaganda. No opposing views are published. Independent journalists are bullied and attacked in these media outlets.

We also have a similar situation as regards regional media. Each of the 19 counties has its major daily print newspaper and an online edition, all under government control. The government is also the biggest spender on the advertising market, with about 90% of spending going to friendly outlets.

Despite all circumstances, I’m still optimistic because we have our independent news site. Recently we started an internship programme to train young people to carry the flame. We received 500 applications for eight internships. The first questions I asked candidates were why they were there, what they wanted from life, and if they were aware of what was going on in their country. It was encouraging to see so many of them.

As I see it, the main issue is how to define press freedom. Government actors in Hungary say there is free press in Hungary. On paper there are media laws and a media authority. You can ask questions. You can chase politicians on the street and write anything you want. But press freedom is more than just writing whatever you want. You have to have all the processes we have described; you have to think about journalists being killed or bullied for doing their jobs.

My view is that we need to define what press freedom means first at EU level, and then we can have laws, bring in sanctions, and take further steps against the countries that do not meet these conditions.

“My view is that we need to define what press freedom means first, and then we can have laws, bring in sanctions, and take further steps against the countries that do not meet these conditions”
Polls

The following five tables show the results of polls run among participants during the seminar.

Wordcloud poll

What does Europe mean to you today?

- Business opportunities
- Solidarity
- Food security
- Community
- Competitiveness
- Inequality
- Opportunities
- Stop veto power
- Food
- Peace
- Tourism
- Sureness
- Home
- United in diversity
- Identity
- Democracy
- Travelling easily
- Global perspective
- Equal pay
- Strengthening European id
- Our whole history future
- Future
- Strength
- Together
- Just transition
Multiple-choice poll

How much do you know about the Conference on the Future of Europe?

- a) I am an expert: 47%
- b) What’s that?: 3%
- c) Rings a bell but I’m not sure, remind me again: 50%

Multiple-choice poll

Do you think that the EU should do more or less in these areas in the future? Health and pandemics

- a) More: 91%
- b) Less: 0%
- c) I’m happy with things as they are now: 9%

Multiple-choice poll

Do you think that the EU should do more or less in these areas in the future? Economy and social justice

- a) More: 80%
- b) Less: 10%
- c) I’m happy with things as they are now: 10%

Multiple-choice poll

Do you think that the EU should impose financial sanctions on Member States which fail to respect the rule of law?

- a) Definitely: 71%
- b) Maybe but I am afraid civil society will be hurt in the process: 29%
- c) No way: 0%
Speaker profiles

Francisco Assis was born in Amarante in 1965 and has a degree in Philosophy from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Porto. He was Mayor of Amarante from 1989 to 1995 and has since then occupied several positions in the Portuguese Socialist Party. He was a member of the Portuguese Parliament (from 1995 to 2002 and from 2009 to 2014), President of the Socialist Parliamentary Group (from 1997 to 2002 and from 2009 to 2011) and member of the European Parliament (from 2004 to 2009 and from 2014 to 2019). Currently he is the President of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council.

Anthony Bellanger is a French journalist, trade unionist and historian with a PhD in history. Since 2015, he has been the General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), based in Brussels. It is the world's largest journalism organisation, currently representing more than 600 000 journalists in 150 countries around the world. On top of his work for the IFJ, he has been a freelance journalist for various international media outlets since 2014. They include *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Mediapart*, *Equal Times*, *L’Humanité* and *Hommes & Libertés* and the magazine of the Human Rights League. Since 2020, Anthony Bellanger has been working as a professor of international journalism at the School of Journalism of the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium.

Séamus Boland has been the President of the EESC’s Diversity Europe Group since October 2020. His policy and political interests include the eradication of poverty, social exclusion and inequality. In addition to the Group presidency, he holds several other roles outside the EESC. He has been CEO of Irish Rural Link since 2001, a Board Member of Inland Fisheries Ireland since 2018 and Chair of Peatlands Council since 2012. Mr Boland is a farmer and has worked in civil society for over 40 years, including with young people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people living in rural isolation. From 2007 to 2013, he was a member of the first Press Council of Ireland. He is a trained Speech and Drama Educator.

Małgorzata Bonikowska is a political scientist, consultant and media commentator. Dr Bonikowska is a former Fulbright scholar and holds a PhD in European studies and history. She is currently President of the Centre for International Relations, a leading independent Polish foreign affairs think tank, and publisher of the “THINKTANK” journal. She specialises in European affairs and international relations. Throughout her career, Dr Bonikowska has served as advisor to several Polish Ministers and from 1998-2001, was head of Poland’s European Information Centre. Between 2001 and 2017, she worked as a European Commission expert and Director of the EU Information and Communication Programme in Poland and Bulgaria and as a senior advisor at the Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Dr Bonikowska has also worked as a consultant and an expert on EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy.
Matthew Caruana Galizia is the Director of the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation. He has worked on major investigations such as the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers. Since 2018, Matthew has been working on the case surrounding the killing of his mother, Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was assassinated in 2017 following her investigations into corruption in Malta. Since then, Matthew and his family have worked tirelessly to tackle impunity when it comes to corruption and the murder of journalists in Europe and beyond.

Lorenzo Consoli is a journalist specialising in EU affairs. Born in Brindisi, Italy, Mr Consoli has worked as a journalist in Brussels since 1991. He covered stories for news agencies, newspapers, radio and specialist magazines until October 2000. Between 2000 and 2003, he worked for the Greenpeace EU unit in Brussels. Returning to journalism in April 2003, Mr Consoli has since worked for the Italian news agency Apcom, now called Askanews. He has dealt with every domain of EU affairs, with a particular focus on institutional issues and environmental, climate, agriculture, health, consumer and energy policies. Between 2006 and 2010, Mr Consoli was the president of the Brussels International Press Association (Api). Between 2010 and 2020, he was a visiting lecturer for the Executive Master in European Journalism and Communication at the IHECS in Brussels.

Francesco Corti is an Associate Research Fellow at the CEPS think tank on EU affairs and Adjunct Professor of European economic governance at the University of Milan. An expert in European social and employment policies, EU budget, EMU governance, and social investment, Francesco has provided research and advisory services to various Brussels-based think tanks and EU institutions. He served as policy advisor to an MEP in the ECON Committee between 2016 and 2019. Francesco holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Milan. He was a visiting fellow at the European Social Observatory (OSE) and a member of the Young Academic Network of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

Anniek de Ruijter is Associate Professor of Health Law and Policy at the University of Amsterdam and Director of the Law Centre for Health and Life. Her research focuses on questions regarding constitutional safeguards for health-specific rights and values, also in the context of EU and global regulatory interactions. She works in interdisciplinary collaboration within biomedical, public health, economic and social science consortia and is the co-lead on two interdisciplinary research consortia, on Global Health and on AI Decision-making in Health. She is a board member of the Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development and is also on the editorial board of the European Journal of Risk Regulation and on the editorial advisory board of The Lancet Regional Health Europe. She is the co-initiator of the European Health Union Manifesto initiative (with the Gastein Forum).
Márton Kárpáti has been the CEO of Telex.hu, Hungary’s new independent news portal, and the owner of its publisher, Van Másik Ltd., since August 2020. He co-founded Telex.hu after leaving Hungary’s biggest news site, Index.hu, where he had been deputy editor-in-chief since 2013 and where he managed the entire editorial team, which included not only the newsroom, but also the video and photo section. Mr Kárpáti, who describes himself as an “obsessive believer in freedom, both of individuals and of the press”, was among the editors and almost ninety employees to leave Index.hu following a dispute with the new owners over the sacking of the site’s lead editor. From 2004 to 2013, he worked as political editor at both Index and TV2. He began his career in journalism as a political correspondent for the MTI news agency, where he first worked as a crime reporter.

Bruno Kaufmann is the Global Democracy Correspondent for the Swiss Broadcasting Company. He studied political science and conflict studies at the Universities of Zurich, Gothenburg and Hawaii and holds a MA in Social Sciences. As a journalist he has worked for daily and weekly newspapers in Switzerland and Germany, as well as public radio and TV in Sweden and Switzerland. Bruno is the author of the “European Democracy Passport” (available in 24 languages) and has published extensively on participatory and direct democracy at the transnational level, including many publications on the European Citizens Initiatives. Bruno Kaufmann lives with his family in Arboga/Sweden, where he serves as a “River Councillor” for the municipality.

Xenia Kounalaki was born in Hamburg in 1971. She has worked as a journalist for daily newspaper Kathimerini since 1994 and as a weekly columnist and foreign news editor since 2007. She contributes news reports to Spiegel and Spiegel Online, Die Welt and The European. She previously worked as a foreign news editor for the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) and presented her own TV programme. In 2012, she was awarded the ISF (Information Safety and Freedom) international press freedom prize in Florence. That same year, she co-authored the book Βία (Violence) on political violence. In 2016 she published a memoir titled Στις ταινίες κλαίω στις πιο άσχετε στιγμές (I cry during the most random movie scenes), a journalist’s account of living and working in Greece during the crisis. Her short essay titled Antisemitism in Greece and her first novel Οξυγόνο (Oxygen) were both published in 2019.

Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová has worked as a video reporter for Denník SME since November 2018. Before that, she worked for seven years for the Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTS). Together with 11 other reporters, she left the public broadcaster in May 2018 as a protest against the management, which they said was trying to favour Russian propaganda and the governing party in the news. She covers mainly politics, but also topics about minorities and social issues.
Cillian Lohan was elected Vice-President of the European Economic and Social Committee in October 2020, and has been an active member of the institution since 2015. He is a leader in the field of the Circular Economy and was the inaugural chair of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, which he helped to establish. Cillian has extensive experience as a delegate to the UN, working on initiatives such as the COP climate negotiations and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. As CEO of the Green Economy Foundation, he has overseen ambitious projects, including the planting of over one million trees in Ireland and the establishment of a wildlife reserve in Tobago. Cillian graduated from University College Cork and the University of Ulster with a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in Science.

Miguel Poiares Maduro currently holds the chair at the Global School of Law of the Catholic University of Portugal. He is also Director of the Gulbenkian Foundation’s Future Forum and Executive Board chair of the European Digital Media Observatory. A former Advocate General at the European Court of Justice, Prof. Maduro has taught, both as a regular or visiting professor, at several top law schools in Portugal, Europe and the USA, including the Yale Law School, the London School of Economics and the College of Europe. He headed the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence where he continues to be a visiting professor. From 2013 to 2015 he was Minister Adjunct to the Portuguese Prime Minister and the Minister for Regional Development. He chaired the Governance and Review Committee of FIFA. He has a Doctorate in Law from the EUI.

Julie Majerczak has been the EU representative of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the international press freedom NGO, since April 2016. Before joining RSF, Julie was a journalist for 16 years. She moved to Brussels in 2002 to report on EU affairs for the French daily newspaper Libération for which she worked for ten years. She also reported for the French daily newspaper Le Parisien, RTL radio and the online media outlets Contexte and Novethic. Before that, Julie worked in politics as an MEP’s assistant and as a political adviser to a French environment minister. Born in Paris, she has a Master’s in Law and is a graduate of Sciences Po Paris.

Stefano Mallia was elected President of the EESC Employers’ Group in 2020 and has been a member of the European Economic and Social Committee since 2010. He has served in different roles at the EESC, including as Vice-President of the Employers’ Group and President of the Brexit Follow-up Committee. Mr Mallia is an expert in EU affairs, specialising in EU Structural Funds and SME financing. Over the years, he has carried out assignments for the European Commission, the Maltese government as well as private enterprises. He is a former President of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry. Mr Mallia is also active in the private sector. Since 1998, he has been a partner at EMCS Ltd., an economic analysis and business consultancy.
Isabelle Marchais has been associate researcher on health matters at the Jacques Delors Institute since March 2020. She has written several commentaries on the health crisis, in particular on the COVAX mechanism, the future Health Authority, the COVID certificate and the vaccine race. She is also a member of the working group on health set up by the Jacques Delors Institute. A graduate of the Paris Political Institute, she previously followed the European Union as a journalist and worked for many elements of the French media, including Libération, the Société Générale de Presse and finally L’Opinion, for which she was the Brussels correspondent from 2013 to 2019.

Raquel Morão Lopes has been European news programme co-editor-in-chief at the Portuguese public broadcaster RTP since 2018. Before that, she was Brussels correspondent for RTP’s radio news channel Antena 1 from 2015 to 2017, where she covered the 2016 terrorist attacks, the European migrant crisis, the Greek government debt crisis and Brexit. She has been with the RTP Radio since 2005, as a news anchor, team coordinator and reporter specialising in economic affairs. Raquel began her career in journalism at the LUSA news agency with an internship in 2004. In 2017, she was a finalist for the Fernando de Sousa Journalism Award for her special feature “La Petite École”. Currently, she also does voice-over narration for documentaries.

Ana Rita Moura works in the Media Services Unit of the Directorate-General for Communication in the European Parliament. Together with press officers based in the Member States, Ms Moura liaises with the European media on a daily basis. She holds a Master’s degree in Public Relations Strategic Management and has worked in different areas of communication for the last 20 years, mostly in the public sector. She joined the European Parliament in 2013 and had the chance to be involved in communicating on several democratic exercises, including two European elections and now the Conference on the Future of Europe and the Citizens’ Panels. Previously, she worked for different media organisations, Google, the European Commission and UNMIT. She is passionate about the EU, democracy, human rights, communication, travelling, meeting new people and sci-fi.

Elza Pais is a member of the Portuguese Parliament and President of the National Department of the Social Women. Elza Pais works tirelessly to champion women’s and LGBTI rights, fighting against all kinds of discrimination as a politician, academic and author. Her main focus is on domestic abuse, women’s empowerment, gender equality, drug prevention and social integration. A former Secretary of State for Equality, she also chaired parliamentary commissions for equality and the Portuguese Institute for Drug Abuse and Addiction. She dealt with the same topics while working as a professor at the Portuguese Catholic University and does so in her current role as a researcher at Lisbon’s top universities and research centres. She is the author of several books on domestic and gender violence and the winner of the 2007 Arco-Iris Award for her work against homophobia.
Susana Peralta has a PhD in Economics from the UCL, in Belgium. She is a public economist with an interest in taxation and transfers, fiscal federalism and political economy. Ms Peralta joined the Nova School of Business and Economics in 2004, where she is currently an Associate Professor. She also served as the academic director of the MSc and PhD in Economics. Ms Peralta’s work is published in academic journals such as The Economic Journal, the Journal of Public Economics, Public Choice, the Journal of Public Economic Theory, The Journal of International Economics, Regional Science and Urban Economics and the Journal of Urban Economics. She writes a weekly op-ed in the Portuguese mainstream newspaper Público, every Friday.

Oliver Röpke has been the president of the EESC Workers’ Group since March 2019 and an EESC member since 2009. Currently sitting in the Social Affairs and Citizenship (SOC) and Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT) sections, he has been rapporteur of several opinions. He has also been a member of the EESC Bureau and president of the Permanent Study Group on Social Economy Enterprises. Mr Röpke has been the head of the Brussels office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) since 2008, a member of the federal executive board, ÖGB representative in the ETUC and a member of the Social Dialogue Committee. He holds a degree in law from the University of Vienna.

Daniel Rosário is currently the spokesperson of the European Commission’s Representation in Portugal, where he has headed the Press & Communication team since September 2020. Mr Rosário joined the Spokesperson’s Service (SPP) of the European Commission in 2014 as spokesperson in charge of Trade and Agriculture. He previously worked as a journalist for several Portuguese media outlets, including as a correspondent in Brussels for 15 years.

Michael Sauga was born in 1959 in Goslar am Harz, Germany. He studied economics at the University of Cologne and worked as an editor for Wirtschaftswoche, Focus, and, from 2000, at Der Spiegel’s Berlin office. Since March 2021, he has been economics and finance correspondent at Der Spiegel’s Brussels office. He published the books Wer arbeitet ist der Dumme: die Ausbeutung der Mittelschicht (Only Dummies Work: The exploitation of the middle class) in 2007, and Gelduntergang: wie Banken und Politik unsere Zukunft verspielen (The Downfall of Money: how banks and politics gamble away our future) in 2012, which he co-wrote with Ursula Weidenfeld.
Christa Schweng was elected president of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in October 2020. She has been an EESC member for 22 years, working as rapporteur for numerous opinions. She was president of the EESC’s Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship between 2018 and 2020 and chaired the Labour Market Observatory from 2013 to 2015. Ms Schweng gained deep expertise in social and employment issues working as an advisor both at EU level and in Austria. Outside the EESC, she works for the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. She has been a member of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work since 1995. She chaired the SMEunited Social Affairs Committee between 2001 and 2009. Christa Schweng holds a Master’s degree in Law from the University of Vienna.

Mónica Silvares has been a journalist her whole life, but feels she always has something new to learn. She started her career as a journalist for a medical magazine, while she was still a third-year student of Communication Sciences at the NOVA University of Lisbon. Her journalism career seriously took off at Diário Económico, where she did a little bit of everything – from writing for the newspaper's international section, when there was still no Internet in the newsrooms, to working for the television station set up by the group. At the same time, Mónica worked for other publications, such as Negócios & Franchising and translated books about economics and management. She currently works for the online newspaper ECO.

Andrzej Stankiewicz is deputy editor-in-chief of Onet.pl, the largest independent news website in Poland. Before joining Onet in 2016, he was a journalist for the newspaper Rzeczpospolita and the weekly magazines Newsweek Polska and Wprost for almost 20 years. He is a political reporter, columnist and investigative journalist, and a three-time winner of the Grand Press award, the most important journalism award in Poland, for the best journalism of the year. Mr Stankiewicz is the co-author of the Bible of Journalism and several other books. He presents the most popular political podcast in Poland and a host of political programmes on national radio, and is a regular TV commentator. He has twice successfully taken cases to the European Court of Human Rights, to overturn convictions in the Polish courts for his journalistic publications.
Special thanks to:

Daniel Rosário, head of Communication and spokesperson, European Commission Representation in Portugal, for his information talk: How the CoFoE platform works

Ana Rita Moura, European Parliament, for her information talk: The structure of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the citizens’ panels

Raquel Morão Lopes, Radio and Television of Portugal, moderator of panel I

Mónica Silvares, journalist at ECO - Economia online, moderator of panel II

Bruno Kaufmann, Global democracy correspondent at SWI swissinfo.ch, moderator of panel III

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### List of participants

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<td>Der Spiegel correspondent in Brussels</td>
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