2020 EESC achievements looking back to move forward

European Economic and Social Committee
This brochure is based largely on the Annual Activity Report 2020, issued in June 2021, which is the European Economic and Social Committee's main tool for reporting annually to the budgetary authority. Additional source materials include the EESC’s Statistics 2020 publication by the Directorate for Communication and Interinstitutional Relations, the EESC’s website and social media content, and general activities at the Committee throughout 2020.

The full Annual Activity Report can be viewed here: www.eesc.europa.eu/en/about
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FOREWORD

Dear readers,

It is my pleasure to present to you this year's edition of the EESC's annual achievement brochure, which looks back on 2020, a year that has already entered the history books as an extremely dramatic one for the whole world. It was a year in which concepts such as ‘masks obligatory’, ‘lockdowns’, ‘quarantine’ and ‘social distancing’ became part of our everyday language. COVID-19 continues to affect all aspects of our lives. The pandemic and the subsequent recession have severely impacted the European economy, pushing millions of people into poverty.

We were also witnesses to a decision of historic importance. Brexit was a choice made by British citizens to leave the EU – after 47 years of membership – which we all deeply regret but also respect. The EESC bade farewell to its British members with the promise of maintaining close ties with UK civil society.

This year marked a new beginning for the Committee, with a renewal rate of more than 40%. The new members were appointed and the next five-year term of office began. Austria's Christa Schweng was elected president with the strong conviction that EU civil society has the power to contribute to Europe's post-COVID-19 recovery and future resilience.

Despite the pandemic, the Committee remained very active and made a major contribution to the priorities of the European Union by putting the citizen at the heart of its opinions and activities. We launched a dedicated webpage for Civil society against COVID-19, bringing together over fifty stories of recovery, solidarity and practical action in the face of the coronavirus outbreak. This webpage details initiatives on the ground undertaken by EESC members through their national organisations in their respective Member States.

The EESC launched a Civil Solidarity Prize, a one-off award with the specific theme of Civil society against COVID-19, which this year replaced our flagship annual Civil Society Prize. The Civil Solidarity Prize honoured creative and effective initiatives that have made an outstanding contribution to tackling the grave and wide-ranging consequences of the emergency, thereby strengthening European solidarity and helping to create a European identity based on common EU values.

Our Committee worked on key policy areas that matter to people, including a stronger European Health Union, the European Green Deal, human rights and the rule of law, the new pact for migration, digital transformation and the consequences of Brexit. The EESC supported the proposals of the European Commission: the Next Generation EU plan and the overall EU budget for 2021-2027. In June 2020, the EESC
published a resolution entitled *EESC proposals for post-COVID-19 crisis reconstruction and recovery*, in which members called for an ambitious programme of reforms that could lead to a new model for society. The ability of our institution to address these issues and challenges with the unified, collective voice of civil society, reached through constant dialogue, is what makes the EESC so special.

Hence I can proudly say that, despite the background of all the restrictions caused by the pandemic, the Committee continued to carry out its institutional role fully through new ways of working: hybrid and virtual meetings, remote voting, the use of videoconferencing facilities with a professional interpretation service, full remote plenary sessions organised on EESC premises, etc.

The past year marked the 70th anniversary of the Schuman declaration, the starting point of the European project. The vision invoked by Europe’s founding fathers is even more important today for coping with present and future challenges: our committee is fully engaged in this task.

I hope you enjoy reading what the EESC has done in the past year and my hopes are high that, thanks to scientific progress, we will gradually return to a normal way of life as an institution and also as citizens. The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters signifying ‘danger’ and ‘change point’. I believe that a crisis can also be an opportunity to move ahead in shaping the post-COVID-19 EU, along with the slogan of our new president: *United for the future of Europe!*

Gianluca Brunetti
Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee

We believe that the European Union is about building bridges and breaking down barriers. As we strive every day to be a bridge between European civil society and the EU institutions, we would like to share with you some success stories from 2020. *We hope you enjoy reading about them.*
As laid down by the treaties, the EESC members are appointed every five years, by the Council, based on nominations from Member States. In October 2020, the EESC began its 2020-2025 term of office with its 329 newly appointed members. This time, over 40% of them are new – bringing their fresh outlook ideas and energy to our work.

“More than ever, we need to join forces, develop a vision for a stronger post COVID-19 Europe and do our utmost to ensure that our Committee makes a powerful contribution to Europe’s recovery and future resilience.

Christa Schweng, President of the EESC
BEFORE WE BEGIN
WHAT IS THE EESC?

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is an EU consultative body that was set up some 60 years ago to advise European decision-makers, by delivering opinions to the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Commission. The EESC ensures that citizens’ organisations have a say in Europe’s development. A unique body, the Committee provides a forum for consultation, dialogue and consensus-building among representatives from the various sections of organised civil society.

WHAT ARE THE EESC’S OBJECTIVES?

The EESC is committed to European integration. It helps strengthen the EU’s democratic legitimacy and effectiveness by enabling civil society organisations from the Member States to express their views at the European level.

In other words

**The EESC’s purpose is to give organised civil society a voice in Europe**

But how do we do that?

First, we help to ensure that European policies and legislation better reflect economic, social and civic realities by advising the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. We do this by tapping into EESC members’ experience and stimulating dialogue and efforts to secure consensus, which serves the general interests of the EU.

Second, we promote the development of a more participatory EU that is more in touch with public opinion, by acting as an institutional forum representing, informing, expressing the views of and securing dialogue with organised civil society.

Third, we promote the values on which European integration is founded and advance the cause of democracy – in particular participatory democracy – as well as the role of civil society organisations, in Europe and around the world.
WHAT IS ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY?

The term civil society embraces a wide range of organisations and their activities to improve the well-being of their members or communities. Employers organisations, trade unions, networks, associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), interest groups and movements are formed to advance their common interests through collective action. These groups often act as intermediaries between decision-makers and the public, offering an avenue for people to play an active role in bringing about change or to support good causes.

HOW IS CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTED?

The EESC is made up of 329 members from the 27 Member States. They are not politicians, but employers, trade unionists, farmers, and representatives of professional and community associations, youth organisations, women’s groups, consumer associations, environmental campaigns, and many more. They come from all social and professional backgrounds and have a vast range of knowledge and experience.

Members are not based full-time in Brussels, where the Committee has its headquarters, but have their own jobs in their home countries, ensuring that they maintain direct grassroots contacts. They are completely independent in carrying out their duties, working in the general interest of the European Union and its citizens. By debating issues that involve and affect civil society, and adopting opinions on those subjects, Committee members play an integral part in policy formation and decision-making at EU level.

Members are nominated for a renewable five-year term by the Council of the EU on a proposal from each Member State.
HOW IS THE EESC ORGANISED?

EESC members work in three groups:

Employers’ Group

The Employers’ Group brings together entrepreneurs and representatives of entrepreneur associations working in a vast array of business sectors, from industry to retail and from agriculture to services, representing all enterprises from SMEs to large businesses. Our members are active in the business world and bring the day-to-day reality of business in all EU Member States to the European level. They are genuinely committed to putting their own experience to good use to further the European venture.

The work of the Employers’ Group is framed by priorities reflecting the key needs of European businesses. In order to match the dynamics in which European businesses operate, these priorities are reviewed regularly. Our current priorities are: fostering EU values, strengthening the economic foundations, bringing the EU to the digital forefront and seizing opportunities provided by proactive climate action. Together, the Employers Group is striving to create a European business environment that provides opportunities for employers to grow and be successful.

The Employers’ Group works closely with its six partner organisations: BusinessEurope, Copa-Cogeca, EUROCHAMBRES, EuroCommerce, SGI Europe and SMEunited.
Workers’ Group

This group is comprised of representatives from more than 80 national trade unions, confederations and sectoral federations.

It is firmly committed to enlarging and strengthening the EU, as an area of prosperity, freedom and democracy, mutual support and social cohesion, and aims to ensure that workers play a real part in European policy-making. In view of the significant challenges posed by the pandemic, climate change and digitalisation on both European economies and the world of work, a strong workers’ voice will be key to ensure a sustainable recovery, and socially balanced and just transitions. Although the European social model is an example for much of the world, there are still too many people suffering hardship or exclusion from society because of poverty, discrimination, lack of education or other disadvantages, and the pandemic has exacerbated these precarious conditions. Priorities for the Workers’ Group are and will remain full employment, better living and working conditions, and the well-being of all EU citizens, as well as that of workers and their families on other continents.

Diversity Europe Group

This group ensures that the EESC voices the concerns of the various economic, social, occupational and civic organisations that make up civil society in the Member States. Its overall aim is to truly strengthen participatory democracy across the EU and to make sure that EESC opinions on EU legislative proposals reflect the interests of all Europeans. Its activities therefore build on three pillars: diversity in democracy, consensus building and civic engagement.

Members represent the following fields: academia, citizens’ participation and empowerment, civil society development, consumers, environment, heritage and sustainable development, farming, fisheries and coastal communities, forestry, protection of human rights (issues concerning children, elderly, families, gender equality, marginalised and underprivileged groups, migrants and refugees, minorities, persons with disability, women and youth), liberal professions, small and medium-sized enterprises and craft enterprises and the social economy.
Presidency and political bodies 2020-2023

PRESIDENCY

Vice-President
Chair of the Communication Commission
Christa SCHWENG
Employers’ Group

Vice-President
Chair of the Commission for financial and budgetary affairs
Giulia BARBUCCI
Workers’ Group

BUREAU
39 members

Audit Committee

Quaestors

President
Stefano MALLIA
Employers’ Group
Group I

President
Oliver RÖPKE
Workers’ Group
Group II

President
Séamus BOLAND
Diversity Europe Group
Group III

GROUPS

President
Stefano PALMIERI
(Gr II)
ECO
Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion

President
Alain COHEUR
(Gr III)
INT
Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption

President
Belba MILTOVIĆA
(Gr III)
TEN
Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society

President
Aurel Laurenţiu PLOSCEANU
(Gr I)
SOC
Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

President
Peter SCHMIDT
(Gr II)
NAT
Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment

President
Dimitris DIMITRADIS
(Gr I)
REX
Section for External Relations

President
Pietro Francesco DE LOTTO
(Gr I)
CCMI
Consultative Commission on Industrial Change

President
Javier DOZ ORRIT
(Gr II)
ESG
Ad-hoc group European Semester

President
Louise GRABO
(Gr III)
DSMO
Digital Transition and Single Market Observatory

President
Cristian PIRVULESCU
(Gr III)
FRRL
Ad-hoc group Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law

President
Lech PILAWSKI
(Gr II)
LMO
Labour Market Observatory

President
Lutz RIBBE
(Gr III)
SDO
Sustainable Development Observatory

ASSEMBLY
329 members
THE EESC’S CONSTITUENT BODIES

Working bodies

The EESC has six sections, which specialise in different policies: agriculture and environment; the single market; social issues; economic issues; energy, transport and IT infrastructure; and the external policies of the EU. Members belong to one or more of these sections depending on their areas of expertise, and it is here that the groundwork is laid for Committee opinions. The Committee also has a Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), which monitors industry’s ability to anticipate and adapt to the impact of globalisation. The EESC has set up three specialist observatories – on the digital transition and the single market (DSMO), the labour market (LMO) and sustainable development (SDO). It also has a group focused on the European semester which considers European civil society proposals on growth and employment, a group on fundamental rights and the rule of law and a liaison group promoting civil dialogue and participatory democracy.
The Presidency and the Bureau

Every two-and-a-half years, the EESC elects a Bureau that includes the EESC president and two vice-presidents, the presidents of the three groups, and a varying number of members. The Bureau’s main task is to organise and coordinate the work of the EESC’s various bodies and to lay down policy guidelines. The president directs all the work of the Committee and represents the EESC in its relations with other institutions and bodies. The two vice-presidents are responsible for budget and communication, respectively.

Luca Jahier (April 2018 - October 2020)

Luca Jahier started his mandate in April 2018, with the strong determination to spread the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance to speed the transformation for a sustainable Europe. On the back of Brexit, and ahead of the European elections, Mr Jahier emphasised the vital role civil society had to play to steer the European economy and society towards more sustainable and smart models.

Under his presidency, Europe has faced the worst crisis since World War II: the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the joint efforts of the administration and the political level, the Committee's activities did not stop: quite the contrary, the EESC dived into an intense schedule of remote meetings and innovative communication practices and activities.

On Mr Jahier’s initiative, in April 2020, the EESC established a specific subcommittee on ‘Post-COVID-19 crisis recovery and reconstruction’ to work on both implementing the measures that were decided on and preparing the rollout of the recovery plans linked to the EU’s long-term budget. The work led to an overarching resolution, adopted on 11 June 2020, which spelled out that the recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 crisis would only be successful if it was accompanied by the restructuring of society.

At the end of his mandate, Mr Jahier was convinced that Europe had once again shown its resilience. Nationalists and Eurosceptics were defeated in the European elections and the way Europe dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic delivered an undisputable blow to their fake narrative. The EU had taken unprecedented measures and in a few months broke taboos carved in stone, protecting its citizens and communities and investing in a strong strategy for our future.

For Mr Jahier it was clear that his three Presidency priorities – Sustainable Development, Peace and Culture – remained at the core of this Renaissance for Europe, which he called rEUnaissance. Luca Jahier was convinced that civil society could lead the way, and during his presidency, the EESC set the tone for a vibrant and active civil society, which demands to be properly involved, beyond the mandate as established by the Treaty.

Europe has been put to a test by multiple crises and this time more than ever. I am sure we have enough energy and creativity to come out stronger, again, all together. Now it is time to rise to the challenge once more.

Luca Jahier, former President of the EESC
Christa Schweng (since October 2020)

Christa Schweng took office as the EESC president in October 2020 at a challenging time, when Europe was gripped by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her presidency motto, *United for the future of Europe*, reflects the belief that unity is what the EU and its citizens need the most to overcome the pandemic and the economic crisis it has provoked. Ms Schweng set her goals on a swift recovery and on shaping a vision for a post-COVID-19 Europe.

Ms Schweng’s priorities focus on three pillars: a Europe that prospers economically, a Europe that is socially inclusive and a Europe that is environmentally sustainable. The Europe of the future should provide the right conditions for all of civil society to thrive and live in open, values-based democracies.

She is steering the EESC’s work to focus on major global trends such as the digital and green transitions. The aim is to guarantee that the EU fully reaps the benefits of this change and to ensure that no one is left behind.

President Schweng has also initiated work to improve the EESC’s image, starting with strengthening ethical standards and transparency through an enhanced Code of Conduct.

"We want to play an active role in shaping the future of the EU – through our day-to-day work on opinions, the discussions we arrange and through valuable input into the conference on the Future of Europe. Exceptional times require exceptional unity. Only by acting together shall we succeed. United for the future of Europe!"

Christa Schweng, President of the EESC
Secretary-General

Gianluca Brunetti is the EESC’s secretary-general. The chief role of the secretary-general is to implement decisions made by the Committee’s plenary assembly, the Bureau and the president. He is also responsible for managing the administration and the budget of the Institution, and assisting members in carrying out their duties.

HOW DOES THE EESC TAKE ACTION?

Under the EU treaties, the European Parliament, Council and the Commission are required to consult the EESC on a wide range of policy issues when passing new legislation. As well as being required to refer to the EESC on certain matters, these three institutions may consult the Committee on other matters whenever they consider it appropriate. The EESC draws up and adopts, at any of its nine annual plenary sessions held in Brussels, opinions based on a consensus reached between its members. Once adopted, its opinions are forwarded to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission and published in the Official Journal of the European Union.

The EESC may also decide to draft own-initiative opinions on any question pertaining to the EU, its policies, and potential policy development. It also issues exploratory opinions in response to requests from the presidencies of the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament in spheres where it is regarded as having the appropriate skills and expertise. Such requests are not necessarily related to a piece of draft legislation. The EESC may express itself through other types of text, such as information reports, resolutions, and position papers.
An opinion is born

> REFERRAL by the European Parliament, Council or Commission
>

> AUTHORISED by the Bureau

> SECTIONS confirm rapporteur and study group

> DRAFTING by rapporteur with study group input

OR

> OWN INITIATIVE by the EESC

DISCUSSION, VOTE AND ADOPTION by sections/CCMI

DISCUSSION, VOTE AND ADOPTION by the assembly in plenary session

SENT to the EU institutions AND

PUBLISHED in the EU’s Official Journal (24 languages)

Rapporteur PRESENTS key findings and PROMOTES the opinion at EU, Member State and local levels
A reinforced ethical framework

Following the entry into force, in March 2019, of the Code of Conduct, the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members continued its work in 2020 to prepare its internal rules of procedure. The Advisory Committee also dealt with its very first case under the procedure foreseen for potential breaches of the Code of Conduct and concluded that the Code had been violated in the case in question, which was related to harassment at the workplace. Subsequently, the Bureau mandated the Advisory Committee to prepare proposals for the revision of the Code of Conduct and drafting its implementing provisions. This new mandate was endorsed by the newly composed Bureau and Assembly in October 2020. The Assembly stressed the need to include stronger sanctions and support mechanisms for victims and the possibility of calling external experts, in line with the other EU institutions’ practice.

The Advisory Committee, submitted the proposal for the revision of the Code of Conduct on 29 December 2020, which included significant changes to its content and structure. Learning from recent experience and shortcomings in the previous Code, and based on the Ombudsman’s recommendations and the European Parliament’s observations in the context of the refusal to grant the discharge for the year 2018, the proposal aimed to reinforce EESC’s internal framework and procedures to better tackle issues related to fraud and misconduct, such as harassment, but also conflicts of interest, integrity and financial transparency.

The new Advisory Committee, renamed the Ethical Committee, was established by the revision of the Code of Conduct adopted by the plenary assembly on 28 January 2021.

“When I took office as EESC president last October, I promised to strengthen our code of conduct. Today, we deliver. I am happy that we ensured a broad support for this proposal. This proves our commitment to high ethical standards and modern, transparent working methods!

Christa Schweng, President of the EESC
BREXIT IN 2020

On 31 January 2020, the UK officially left the European Union after 47 years of membership, meaning that its representatives will no longer be present in the EU institutions. A farewell ceremony took place during the 549th plenary session on 22 January for the 24 British EESC members that officially left the EESC. Madeleina Kay, better known as #EUsupergirl, was a guest at the plenary. As a British activist who campaigned for the UK to remain a member of the EU, she announced during the ceremony that she will continue to fight for Europe in the UK.

Brexit initiated a withdrawal period that ended on 31 December 2020 and since 1 January 2021 the EU and the UK have operated under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). Ultimately, the EESC’s objective is to maintain close ties between the EU and the UK, especially at the level of the civil society, as the EESC underlined in the farewell ceremony for UK members and delegates on 22 January 2020.
EESC AT A GLANCE 2020
THE EESC AT A GLANCE 2020

We keep up with civil society’s concerns – the things that inspire, drive and sometimes frustrate you. In 2020, there was no shortage of these: some already on the radar, others only just starting to gain momentum. As one of the smaller EU institutions in the heart of Brussels, but with its members active across the continent, the EESC is able to track and respond to the issues that concern you the most.

Very opinionated ... in a good way

131 opinions, position papers and reports adopted by the EESC in 2020...

The EESC engages in areas that affect citizens most.

Where can you find the EESC’s opinions?

• on the Committee’s website at eesc.europa.eu
• in the Official Journal of the EU at eur-lex.europa.eu

Total opinions and reports, five-year trend

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<td>2020</td>
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*The number of opinions is dependent on the legislative cycle. 2020 was a year of EESC renewal in a very unusual context.
Opinions: Top five hot topics in 2020

Reviewing the most popular opinions tells us what motivates you. This knowledge helps us develop and calibrate the way we represent organised civil society.

The sustainable economy we need
Own initiative opinion, rapporteur: Peter Schmidt

Revision of the Machinery Directive
Information report, rapporteur: Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu, co-rapporteur: Enrico Gibellieri

COVID-19 Measures
Fisheries and aquaculture
Position paper, rapporteur: Gabriel Sarró Iparraguirre

Mandatory due diligence
Exploratory opinion, rapporteur: Thomas Wagnsonner, co-rapporteur: Emmanuelle Butaud-Stubbs

Decent minimum wages across Europe
Exploratory opinion, rapporteurs: Stefano Mallia, Oliver Röpke
The sustainable economy we need

Rather than pursuing economic growth through narrowly defined indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a wellbeing economy monitors and values what truly matters: our health, nature, education and communities. It means ‘combining the idea of prosperity with the possibility of social progress within planetary boundaries’ with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as the foundation.

In the European Union, the economy of wellbeing has been endorsed by the Council of the EU in October 2019 and by the EESC in January 2020 (NAT/765 opinion The sustainable economy we need). The opinion called on the EU to propose a new vision of prosperity for people and planet based on the principles of environmental sustainability, the right to a decent life and the protection of social values. The economy is an enabler for this vision.

Revision of the Machinery Directive

The Machinery Directive 2006/42/EC is a very successful instrument for European industry, and its basic approach must be left unchanged, in particular when it comes to Essential Health and Safety Requirements (EHSRs) or artificial intelligence.

In fact, massive revision of the Machinery Directive, such as the Essential Health and Safety Requirements (EHSRs), would have a deep negative impact on the developing of harmonised standards and must be avoided.

However, the EESC invites the European Commission to identify ergonomic risks and create the missing link between the Machinery Directive (safe design) and the Use of Work Equipment Directive 2009/104/EC (safe use).

COVID-19 Measures – Fisheries and aquaculture

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on the EU fisheries and aquaculture sector. The EESC provided an opinion on the European Commission’s proposal to amend the Regulation governing the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the Common Market Organisation (CMO) Regulation to help the fisheries and aquaculture sector cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The EESC supports the proposal and urges the Commission to ensure fast implementation and to provide an additional, extraordinary budget to enable Member States to deliver the measures.
Mandatory due diligence

It is time for the European Commission to act and propose legislation on mandatory due diligence that acknowledges responsibility based on current standards and offers a clear and secure legal framework for European businesses. Due diligence obligations should cover environmental impacts which are of great importance for sustainable business. A mandatory due diligence framework should be realised by an agreed standard that is enforced by proportionate, effective and dissuasive sanctions, whereas liability would have to be based on the violation of a clearly defined set of Human Rights. For the EESC, a binding legislative initiative should ensure legal certainty and practicability in particular on the applicable law, proportionate reporting requirements respecting legitimate businesses secrecy.

The mandatory due diligence obligations must cover beside Human, Labour and Trade Union Rights infringements also environmental impacts and have to include a liability resulting in effective remedies for people who are affected by misconduct. They should be considered of great importance for sustainable business conduct and be a high priority in global value chains.

Thomas Wagnsonner, rapporteur

Decent minimum wages across Europe

The EESC prepared an exploratory opinion on Decent minimum wages across Europe, at the request of the European Parliament and in the framework of the EESC’s activities in support of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opinion took account of the results of virtual meetings with representatives of organised civil society in Sweden, Germany, Romania, Spain and Poland as well as a virtual hearing. The EESC expressed concern that poverty in general and in-work poverty were still a significant problem in many Member States. It emphasised that quality employment continued to be the best route out of poverty and that fair minimum wages could contribute to poverty reduction among the working poor, combined with active inclusion policies. Fair minimum wages could also help achieve a number of EU objectives such as upward wage convergence, improving social and economic cohesion or eliminating the gender pay gap. The EESC stressed that any such EU initiative must be shaped on the basis of accurate analysis of the situation in Member States, and must fully respect the social partners’ role and autonomy, as well as the different industrial relations models.

The Employers’ Group believes that the EU has no competence over pay, and pay levels in particular, and that setting minimum wages is a national matter, done in accordance with the specific features of respective national systems. Any misguided action on the part of the EU must be avoided, especially at this particular point in time.

Stefano Mallia, rapporteur

Ensuring that workers across Europe benefit from decent minimum wages must be an essential part of the EU’s recovery strategy. For the Workers’ Group, it is undisputable that all workers should be protected by fair minimum wages allowing a decent standard of living wherever they work.

Oliver Röpke, rapporteur
EESC RENEWAL IN 2020

The year 2020 marked the renewal of the EESC. For the first time in history, the inaugural plenary session was conducted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions. From 27 to 29 October, the 555th EESC plenary session inaugurated members’ new term of office. The new EESC members, who were appointed by the Council on the basis of national lists proposed by Member States, took office for the period from 2020 until 2025.
Unlike EESC members, the EESC presidencies, sections and other permanent and temporary bodies are elected for a period of two and a half years. Thus, on 28 October 2020, the 329 EESC members elected the three members of the presidency who will head the Committee until April 2023. Under the EESC’s rotating system between the three groups, Christa Schweng from the Employers’ Group was elected president. Cillian Lohan, from the Diversity Europe Group, became the new vice-president in charge of communication and Giulia Barbucci, from the Workers’ Group, was elected new vice-president in charge of budget.
EESC PLENARY SESSIONS – WHO SAID WHAT AND WHY?

The EESC promotes the development of a participatory EU, one that is more in touch with the public’s concerns and expectations. It acts as an institutional forum which represents, informs and expresses the views of civil society organisations and is in dialogue with those organisations. All 329 EESC members meet in plenary session nine times a year in order to accomplish their most important duty: voting on opinions. This is a solemn moment in which compromise, consensus-building and internal democracy find their highest expression.

It is also an occasion when special guests from all over Europe and beyond are invited to debate. In the pages that follow, we give you a flavour of plenary activities in 2020 and some of the special guests that we welcomed, what they talked about and what this means for the EESC and citizens around Europe.

A year in the life of the EESC plenaries – 2020

22-23 JANUARY

Debate on the priorities of the Croatian Presidency of the EU, with Gordan Grlić Radman, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia

Farewell ceremony for UK members and delegates
  • Tom Jenkins, former President of the European Economic and Social Committee
  • Madeleina Kay, activist

Presentation of the European Citizens’ Initiative End the Cage Age, with Olga Kikou, European Affairs Manager for Compassion in World Farming

Debate on the theme From COP25 to European Green Deal
Debate on *The Future of Work and the European Pillar of Social Rights* with Guy Ryder, Director-General of the International Labour Organization

Debate among EESC members on *How the Committee can most effectively respond to international crises*

Presentation of the European Citizens’ Initiative *Eat ORIGINal* with Paolo Di Stefano, Head of Coldiretti EU Liaison Office

Presentation of the European Commission’s work programme and the multiannual political priorities for 2019-2024 with Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission

More equitable income distribution could not only reduce inequalities between member states but also lead to improved economic and social conditions all round and a major boost to achieving upward convergence.

Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General
5-7 MAY

First remote plenary session

Employment guidelines
Life-long learning
Demographic challenges

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund in 2021

"We want an ambitious economic partnership. But it must reflect our interests as a union. We will never compromise our values, we will protect our achievement and standards for workers, consumers, and the environment."

Michel Barnier, former Head of the European Commission’s Task Force for Relations with the United Kingdom

10-11 JUNE

Debate with Michel Barnier, former Head of the task force responsible for finalising negotiations under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, for preparatory work related to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, and for preparing and conducting negotiations on future relations with the UK

Debate with Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reform
Debate on the priorities of the German Presidency of the EU, with Peter Altmaier, German Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy

Debate with Margaritis Schinas, European Commission Vice-President with responsibility for migration and protecting our European way of life

Debate with Paolo Gentiloni, European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Taxation and Customs Union

Let us reflect on the value and strength of European welfare state and of our universalistic services. Resilience of our societies and our common values will remain our first lines of defense against the virus.

Paolo Gentiloni, European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Taxation and Customs Union

End-of-mandate ceremony and Farewell ceremony for outgoing members

- Speeches by Milena Angelova, EESC Vice-President responsible for budget, and Isabel Caño Aguilar, EESC Vice-President for communication
- Video messages from Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and David Sassoli, President of European Parliament
- Speeches by Klára Dobrev, Vice-President of the European Parliament, and Giuliano da Empoli, writer and journalist, founding chairman of Volta think tank
- Speech by Luca Jahier, President of the EESC
- Video message by Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission

I very much count on the valuable contribution and the support of this committee. I am looking forward to cooperating closely with you on the Conference of the Future of Europe.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
You play a key role in connecting the hopes and expectations of society with EU leaders. This is the strength of vibrant democracies! Making your voice heard is the first step in being heard.

Charles Michel, President of the European Council

I’m very much looking forward to continuing our fruitful cooperation. It is our task to accompany the EU on its way to #EUrecovery, for the greater good of our citizens and of our European Union.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

This crisis is also an opportunity for Europe to become a more responsive, inclusive, sustainable and fairer Europe that offers tangible benefits to citizens and all those professional categories you represent in the EESC.

David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament
Debate on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities with Sinéad Burke, Irish writer, academic, influencer, activist and broadcaster

Debate on A Europe Fit for the Digital Age with Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission

“It is time to see the strength of our own continent. Industry is Europe’s strong suit and we can create the new digital industrial economic area based on European values.”

Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission
Cooperation with the European Parliament

Members of the EESC had over 22 meetings with members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and took the floor in 19 events at the Parliament. MEPs actively participated in 25 EESC meetings.

The year 2020 was marked by the Coronavirus, which forced the EU institutions to switch quickly to remote working methods. However, the EESC maintained its commitment to cooperate on legislative files, including on recovery. Due to COVID-19 and Brexit, in 2020 some legislative files had to be ready under very short deadlines, sometimes just a few days. The EESC demonstrated flexibility in dealing with these files and adapted its procedures to respond to the legislative needs.

In 2020, COVID-19 prevented many meetings from taking place. Nonetheless, EP Vice-President Klára Dobrev and President David Sassoli participated in the EESC closing and inaugural sessions respectively; the latter also met with outgoing President Jahier in June and with President Schweng in December.

Cooperation with the European Commission

High-level meetings were held throughout 2020, with participants, including the Commission president, six commissioners and the head of the Task Force for Relations with the UK taking part in seven EESC plenary sessions. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, participated in the EESC’s inaugural plenary session through a video message, in which she stressed the EESC’s important role in supporting and delivering a green, digital and resilient recovery. Every year, the Commission publishes a work programme to put into practice the political priorities outlined by its president.
Fulfilling its consultative role, the EESC adopted its contribution to the 2021 Commission Work Programme at its plenary session on 16 July 2020. On 19 October 2020, the European Commission adopted its 2021 work programme, which contains new legislative initiatives across all six headline ambitions of President von der Leyen’s Political Guidelines and is closely linked to the Recovery Plan for Europe.

The EESC’s contribution focused on the following topics:
- An economy that works for people
- A Green Europe
- A Europe fit for the digital age
- A stronger Europe in the world

In 2020, the EESC adopted one exploratory opinion, requested by the European Commission, on the European Climate Pact.

The rise of the pandemic called for immediate implementation of recovery plans and strengthened cooperation within the EU to overcome its effects. As such, the Committee welcomes the Next Generation EU plan and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2021-2027) as they enable a sustainable restart of the economy through investments to not only restore the European economy and society but also help reduce drastically the impacts of further shocks by investing in a resilient, inclusive and climate-friendly economy.

The EESC also hopes that the Conference on the future of Europe will reinforce the EU’s institutional structure and will lead to a renewal of the EU project, able to face the challenges of the coming decades. The EESC stresses in particular that the direct engagement of civil society organisations, social partners and elected representatives must remain a priority of the Conference with a view to building a more democratic, more effective and more resilient Union with all EU citizens.

Cooperation with the European Council and the Council of the European Union

Several bilateral exchanges took place in 2020 between the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the EESC president, Luca Jahier. President Michel attended the EESC inaugural plenary session in October and met the newly elected president, Christa Schweng, in November. They agreed to strengthen cooperation and hold a regular dialogue ahead of European Council meetings on topics relevant to civil society. Charles Michel stressed the importance of organised civil society playing an active role in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Croatia held the Council presidency in the first half of 2020, followed by Germany in the second half, both demonstrating great willingness to cooperate, despite the pandemic. Gordan Grlić Radman, Foreign and European Affairs Minister of Croatia, and Peter Altmaier, Germany’s Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, presented the priorities of their countries’ EU presidencies at a plenary session.
The Croatian and German EU presidencies formally requested a total of 15 exploratory opinions. Ministers and representatives of the EU presidencies attended a variety of EESC-organised events on subjects ranging from digitalisation and sustainability to social dialogue as an important pillar of economic sustainability. References to the Committee’s opinions and initiatives can be found in a number of Council conclusions. Stefano Palmieri, ECO President, intervened in the Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Urban Matters and Territorial Cohesion.

Cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions

Cooperation between the two Committees is enshrined in the Administrative Cooperation Agreement, which was first concluded in 1999 and revised in 2015, establishing a firm legal framework for long-term, efficient and effective cooperation. In May 2020, the general secretaries of the two Committees agreed to extend the cooperation agreement until 30 June 2021.

The CoR President, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, spoke at the inaugural plenary session of the renewed EESC in October 2020. Several events saw the active involvement of EESC members in the CoR’s activities, including EuroPCom and the European Week of Regions and Cities.
The Conference on the Future of Europe

This project, announced in 2019 by Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, aims to give Europeans a greater say on what the European Union does and how it works for them. The objective will be to put civil society back at the heart of the European political agenda, through an effective and consistent engagement with citizens, and making sure that they regain trust in the European project.

From the beginning, the EESC has given the project its full support and is committed to playing an active role in the process. With its 329 members coming from all 27 Member States, the EESC represents all walks of life (employers, trade unions and civil society at large). As the voice of European organised civil society, it will actively engage in the Conference and make sure its voice is heard. As part of the conference plenary and as a permanent observer on its executive board, the EESC will do its utmost to ensure that citizens are involved in the debates, thus playing its unique and undisputed role of bridging the gap between the European institutions and organised civil society, at national, local and European level.

After some delays, the Conference officially started on 9 May 2021.
EVENTS TO REMEMBER

Europe Day

On 9 May 2020, the EESC joined forces with the other EU institutions to celebrate Europe Day digitally by communicating through videos, social media and the internet.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns across most EU Member States and beyond made 9 May 2020 a very special Europe Day. Initial ideas for celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration were overtaken by events as the health impacts of the COVID-19 virus grew more and more severe. The more the pandemic tested European citizens’ way of life, the more it became clear that this was an opportunity to communicate the EU’s responses to the crisis. The EESC’s COCOM members actively participated in the project, making a video focusing on tangible actions taken by the EU to help tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

Throughout the day, testimonials from the fight against the COVID-19 virus were shared, quizzes were held, a music concert organised, and images of the EU flag in different shapes were promoted extensively online.

Civil Solidarity Prize

Instead of its annual Civil Solidarity Day, in 2020 the EESC launched a one-off Civil Solidarity Prize entitled Civil society against COVID-19 to reward not-for-profit initiatives carried out by individuals, civil society organisations or private companies that aimed to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and its manifold consequences.

Launched in July 2020, the competition received 250 applications from across the EU and the UK, from which 23 winners were selected. Through this prize – worth €10 000 per winner – the EESC aimed to boost the visibility of these initiatives, raising awareness of their impact and celebrating all those battling coronavirus in society at large, displaying courage, engagement, solidarity, and civic responsibility.
Meeting of presidents and secretaries-general of the Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) of the EU and the EESC

Videoconference, 9 September 2020

Staged jointly by the EESC and the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, the event was entitled The Conference on the Future of Europe and the role of Economic and Social Councils.

The ESCs will be at the forefront of democratic participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe, without which any reform will be doomed to fail: this was the point made repeatedly by a number of leading French and European politicians.

How could as many citizens as possible be involved in the CoFoE project? The ESCs play a pivotal importance in this respect as they are closest to the citizens and should be as active as possible at all levels. The ESCs knew to whom to speak and what messages to give and should start this process now.

Klára Dobrev, Vice-President of the European Parliament

EESC Liaison Group meeting on COVID-19: Civil society organisations ask to have a hand in designing Europe’s recovery plan

A network of umbrella civil society organisations, which works closely with the EESC under the EESC Liaison Group, gathered for a virtual meeting with the EESC members on 12 May to discuss the challenges they have been facing in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and to call for a key role in designing Europe’s recovery plan.

Civil society organisations have been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic in Europe, often stepping in at a moment’s notice to plug huge gaps in the public provision of social services and healthcare. Therefore, they asked to be around the table with EU institutions and governments to help design a recovery plan for a sustainable Europe.

Following the meeting, the two Liaison Group co-chairs issued a joint statement, summing up civil society’s pleas.

 [...] A real recovery – a true transformation – requires moving away from ‘business as usual’ and changing working methods for the better – and that means truly acknowledging and listening to the voice of European civil society networks, engaging them as key players in the co-creation and continuation of a better Future for Europe.

Luca Jahier, former President of the EESC and Brikena Xhomaqi, Co-chair of the Liaison Group, Director of the Life Long Learning Platform
ECI Day 2020: Today and Beyond

The 2020 European Citizens’ Initiative Day (25 February) was marked by two major developments: the entry into force of the new ECI Regulation and the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe. The chosen theme was *Today and Beyond* to illustrate the societal changes in active citizenship and the ongoing democratic transformation towards new forms of citizen engagement. The event was very well attended, with over 200 participants, including 18 EESC members, 5 (out of 7) representatives of successful ECIs and 10 representatives (out of 14) ongoing ECIs. The representatives of the ongoing ECIs and the ECI Day 2020 partners also had information stands which every year help both to promote their campaigns and to network.

The event was attended by EESC President and European Commission Vice-President, **Dubravka Šuica**, and the famous speaker and best-selling author, **Jamie Susskind**.

Social media coverage was also very good, with a potential reach of more than four million and nearly 900 mentions. The event was a trending topic in Belgium for the entire afternoon.

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What is the moral and philosophical justification for the steps we are currently taking? Unless we start our intellectual work now, the technologies will be faster than our ideas.

Jamie Susskind, author of *Future Politics. Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*
Webinars

Having rapidly adapted to the new working conditions, the EESC was able to organise several webinars accommodating both EESC members and guests speakers on topical issues. To name just a few:

**A fully-fledged Health Union must become the key priority for the future**

In the first-ever webinar held by the Committee, Luca Jahier, President of the EESC, made it clear that the time was ripe for a new step forward in European integration. In discussing the future challenges that the EU was facing with the COVID-19 emergency, Mr Jahier was joined by MEP Margarida Marques (Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s Budget Committee), and Enrico Letta (former Italian Prime Minister and President of the Jacques Delors Institute).

**EU-Africa in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis**

The EU partnership with Africa was the topic of a webinar where participants agreed that consolidation of supply chains and an agreement to ease the external debt burden of African countries were key issues, with participation of Luca Jahier (President of the EESC), Vera Songwe (Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa), Ambassador Ranieri Sabatucci (Head of the EU Delegation and European Union Special Representative to the African Union), Stefano Manservisi (former Director-General for International Cooperation and Development at the European Commission), and Dilyana Slavova (President of the EESC’s Section for External Relations).

**Europe after the pandemic**

A webinar on life after coronavirus and the urgent choices to be made to support future generations and on the urgent need for a strategic review of EU policies, with participation of Luca Jahier (EESC President), Romano Prodi (former Italian Prime Minister and Commission President), Emma Bonino (senator and former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and EU commissioner) and Tiziano Treu (President of the Italian National Council for Economics and Labour).
The EESC has been in action for six decades, driven by one powerful overarching remit: to help strengthen the European Union’s democratic legitimacy and effectiveness by enabling civil society organisations from the Member States to express their views at European level.
FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EU ECONOMIC RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe and the whole world in 2020 triggered a series of severe supply- and demand-side shocks. The health emergency soon turned into a deep recession, a fully-fledged economic and social crisis. Despite the considerable difficulties related to travel and consultation, the EESC made full use of the expertise of its members on the ground and shouldered its responsibilities to guide decision-makers in addressing the economic impact of this unprecedented crisis.

As soon as the first lockdowns in the Member States were announced, the EESC called, in several public statements and position papers, for the necessary EU policy measures to ensure the integrity of the single market and supplies for our healthcare systems, and also for a comprehensive emergency package with exceptional fiscal and monetary policy responses to be put in place. The relevant decisions and specific financial instruments were made available by the EU institutions in the following weeks and were welcomed by the EESC. Later on, the Committee adopted a resolution that put forward a series of proposals for post-COVID-19 reconstruction and recovery and reiterated the need for the EU to act as a community of common destiny. In this resolution and the related opinions and public debates, the EESC endorsed the Commission’s proposal for a package of EUR 1.8 trillion, comprising the EU’s multiannual budget and the NextGenerationEU recovery plan. At the same time, the EESC emphasised the need to maintain the rule-of-law clause, to ensure additional financing for the green and digital transitions, and to involve civil society in all stages of the design and implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans within the European semester. These calls were fully supported by the European Parliament’s negotiating team and ultimately taken up in the legislative process.

Dimitris Dimitriadis, rapporteur for the opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Facility
Apart from the immediate financing needs, the COVID-19 crisis has clearly shown the need for a more solidarity-based and prosperity-oriented framework for economic governance. An EESC opinion on the Economic governance review launched by the Commission considered this issue, including the possibility of introducing a ‘golden rule’ for public investment and a wider range of economic policy objectives to be pursued within such a framework. The European Parliament and the Commission welcomed the timely work of the EESC as an important contribution to the on-going policy debates. The Commission also gave a commitment to follow up on the economic governance review once the immediate challenges of the crisis have been addressed.

Recovering swiftly from the COVID-19 crisis and achieving a more sustainable and resilient European economy that can bring prosperity to the European people and companies will remain the overarching economic priority in the coming months and years. Decision-makers have no time to lose in putting in place the necessary reform and investment plans, completing the banking and the capital markets unions, modernising the current economic governance framework, reforming taxation policy, and creating a real EU fiscal stabilisation function. The EESC stands ready to help develop a comprehensive economic policy response in all these fields, not just within the regular inter-institutional dialogue, but also by ensuring active civil society participation in the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe.

“We urgently need to revise and modernise the economic governance framework. It should be more balanced and have prosperity at its heart, promoting the well-being of people in Europe. Nobody must be left behind. One way to do this is to apply the ‘golden rule’ for public investment to safeguard productivity and the social and ecological base for the well-being of future generations.”

Judith Vorbach, rapporteur for the opinion on the Economic governance review 2020
LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on society, with inequalities rising as a consequence, which is why it is crucial to protect citizens and mitigate the highly damaging socio-economic fall-out of the pandemic. Europe is at a defining moment, when the fight against inequality and poverty in the recovery process remains a priority. In these difficult times, the EESC pays particular attention to vulnerable groups, such as atypical workers, children in poverty, people with disabilities, people in marginalised areas and people with a migrant or ethnic minority background.

Adequate minimum wages

The EESC drew up an exploratory opinion on Decent minimum wages across Europe, at the request of the European Parliament and as part of the EESC’s work to support implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The opinion took account of the results of virtual meetings with representatives of organised civil society in Sweden, Germany, Romania, Spain and Poland, as well as a virtual hearing. The EESC expressed concern that poverty in general and in-work poverty in particular were still a significant problem in many Member States. It emphasised that high-quality employment remained the best route out of poverty and that fair minimum wages, combined with active inclusion policies, could help reduce poverty among the working poor. Fair minimum wages could also help achieve a number of EU objectives such as upward wage convergence, improving social and economic cohesion and eliminating the gender pay gap. The EESC stressed that any such EU initiative must be based on an accurate analysis of the situation in Member States, and must fully respect the social partners’ role and autonomy, as well as the different models of industrial relations.

If Europe still wants to strive for a fairer future for all, the proposal for an initiative on minimum wages must be made a reality as a matter of urgency. This would also be an important signal regarding the future direction of Europe.

Seámus Boland, President of the Diversity Group and President of the study group that drafted the opinion on Decent minimum wages across Europe

Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers’ Group and rapporteur for the opinion on Decent minimum wages across Europe

The COVID-19 crisis has caused and continues to cause huge economic losses, which will inevitably take a huge toll on the businesses. Minimum wages is a sensitive subject, which must be approached in a manner that fully takes into account economic consequences, the division of competences between the EU and Member States and that respects the features of national minimum wage setting and collective bargaining systems.

Stefano Mallia, President of the Employers’ Group and rapporteur for the opinion on Decent minimum wages across Europe
Fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy under threat

Promoting peace, EU values and the well-being of its people are among the EU’s most important aims. Eurobarometer surveys consistently show that a very large majority of EU citizens believe it is important for all EU Member States to respect the core values of the EU, including fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy. However, there is a growing populist and authoritarian drift, which risks undermining the quality of democracy, the rule of law, the protection of fundamental rights and opportunities for civil society to organise itself. The NextGenerationEU recovery plans acknowledge these developments, and explicitly link the recovery funds to respect for the rule of law.

In 2020, the EESC’s Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law focused on adding socio-economic perspectives to the analysis of fundamental rights and the rule of law. The group also issued a synthesis report of its findings from country visits to Romania, Poland, Hungary, France, Austria, Italy and Bulgaria, carried out in 2018-2019, and undertook a virtual country visit to Denmark in December 2020. The EESC adopted two relevant opinions on The rule of law and its impact on economic growth and on Principles for public services that contribute directly to the stability of the free democratic basic order in EU countries. These opinions highlighted the economic cost of failing to uphold the rule of law. The EESC called on the European Commission to improve methods for measuring the economic impact, and for this perspective to be embedded in policies addressing fundamental rights and the rule of law, and underlined that socio-economic rights are essential components of well-functioning democratic societies rooted in fundamental rights and the rule of law. The EESC also proposed common European principles to support the role of public services in defence of democracy. They include, for example, the principles of neutrality, legality, proportionality, equal treatment, and respect for the rule of law, including when receiving EU funds.

It is clear that the European Union is facing an unprecedented challenge, which must be tackled without jeopardising our democracies and fundamental rights. Our common European history has taught us that we cannot tolerate the erosion of the rule of law and fundamental rights on our continent. What has been put in place as a temporary measure cannot be instrumentalised to revert decades-long fights for freedoms and equality. We must get out of this crisis with our democracies – and our European Union – intact.

Luca Jahier, former President of the EESC, and José Antonio Moreno Díaz, former President of the Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law

Human rights and the rule of law are intrinsic to democratic societies and cannot be disregarded. Making the budget contingent on respect for the rule of law should not be controversial, as those values are recognised in Article 2 of the Treaty, and are the values upon which the European Union is built.

Laurențiu Plosceanu, President of the EESC’s Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Stefano Palmieri, President of the EESC’s Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion
Cristian Pîrvulescu, President of the Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law
Services of General Interest (SGIs) and housing

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) aims to achieve greater social convergence by combining economic development with greater social progress. In 2020, the EESC continued to work to inform debates on the implementation of the EPSR and to shape the upcoming EPSR action plan. That year, the EESC focused on two key EPSR principles: Principle 20, on the right to access essential services of good quality and Principle 19, on the provision of access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality.

An EESC public hearing on the implementation of essential services in the framework of the EPSR was held in Brussels in 2018 to examine the added value of Principle 20 of the EPSR. Following this event, the EESC drew up recommendations concerning the rights of access, universal access, universal service, affordability, quality of service, assessment of quality of service and the European Semester, with a view to the future action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

In December 2019, an EESC public hearing was held on the subject of Social housing: a service of general interest to guarantee affordable, decent and energy-efficient housing for all?, which focused on Member States’ increasing shortage of decent and affordable housing. The hearing conclusions led to an EESC own-initiative opinion in which the Committee underlines that, while housing remains a Member State competence, the shortage of decent and affordable housing in the EU requires a dedicated European action plan, with measures that are comprehensive and easy to understand. This will help authorities at all levels to boost the supply of social and affordable housing sustainably and combat homelessness effectively.

The EESC hosted a high-level webinar on universal access to housing in September 2020, which brought together many key players. European Commissioner Nicolas Schmit gave a keynote speech and rapporteurs from the EESC and the EP shared their respective findings on access to decent and affordable housing and answered stakeholders’ questions. Building further on all of these essential steps, in 2021, the EESC will focus on the Commission’s Renovation strategy to boost the renovation of both public and private buildings in order to improve their energy performance and contribute to alleviating energy poverty in Europe.

The right to housing is an international obligation of the Member States which the EU is bound to respect and is stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the Lisbon Treaty. It is the responsibility of the Union and the Member States to respect access to services of general economic interest, including the right to housing.

Raymond Hencks, former EESC member and President of the EESC’s Temporary Study Group on Services of General Interest

There is no fight against climate change without the social dimension of housing. Better social housing is the guarantee of success in taking climate action: quality housing means a better life for citizens and this will bring about a successful climate transition.

Pierre-Jean Coulon, former President of the EESC’s Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society
ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

The EESC supports the call for the EU to commit to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and to adjusting its greenhouse gas reduction target for 2030 accordingly. There are compelling arguments to aim for a minimum reduction of 55% by 2030, to ensure the EU plays its part in the response to the massive global need to reduce emissions.

The potential impact of the COVID-19 crisis cannot and should not lead to relaxing the 2030 reduction target. The EESC believes that we cannot simply restore what existed in the past: we need to restructure and improve it. In addition, the current pandemic is a wake-up call for change when it comes to addressing the climate challenge and truly transforming our old patterns of consumption, with sustainable consumption being the only possible way forward.

The European Climate Pact

In 2020, the EESC delivered an exploratory opinion drawn up at the request of the European Commission (DG CLIMA) on the European Climate Pact, as well as an own-initiative opinion entitled Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process. Both opinions made a substantial contribution to the European Green Deal’s civil society participation and enabling stream. The Climate Pact created a great opportunity to model an innovative participatory approach, which will mirror, support and inspire action already taking place in civil society, within communities, cities and regions. The EESC put forward some very practical proposals in this regard, such as the **Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables**, an EU Climate Finance Forum and appointing members of the EESC as EU-level ambassadors for the constituencies they represent. Moreover, on 4 December 2020, with the support of the German EU Council Presidency, the EESC and the German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) hosted an online event bringing together the EU Institutions, the COP26 UK Presidency, the High-Level Climate Champions and key climate actors to discuss opportunities to strengthen engagement and climate action.

Capacity-building and finance support will be an essential element of the Pact, serving to provide guidance, information and education on climate policies and strategies, as well as to facilitate access to finance for small-scale projects.

Cillian Lohan, Vice-President for communication

"The Climate Pact is an important opportunity to model an innovative participatory approach, which will mirror, support and inspire action already happening in civil society, within communities, cities and regions. We look forward to building this Pact together with the Commission."

Peter Schmidt, President of the EESC’s Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Towards an EU strategy on sustainable consumption

In 2020, the EESC called for a comprehensive EU strategy on sustainable consumption, in a dedicated own-initiative opinion, which stated that a more harmonised approach is needed to overcome the current fragmentation of EU policies and the silo approach and argued that sustainable products and services should be made accessible and affordable to all. Incorporating the social dimension would make our production and consumption systems fairer and more sustainable in the long run. Sustainable consumption is one of the key foundations for achieving the goals of the European Green Deal and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

A webinar dedicated to this topic was hosted by the EESC on 11 June 2020. The rapporteur for the opinion on the topic highlighted key messages and recommendations from the opinion at various events, in particular at a virtual side-event on Making circularity work for a just transition to climate neutrality, held on 14 July 2020 as part of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

"The circular economy is an essential tool to achieve the SDGs and climate targets. As we recover from the COVID-19 crisis, circular economy can help rebuild markets that have collapsed on different foundations: ensuring that value is distributed more fairly, promoting wellbeing and prosperity for all, and leaving no one behind.

Peter Schmidt, President of the EESC’s Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment"
TRANSITION IN INDUSTRY

EU industry is undergoing a green and digital transition, as industrial sectors face the need for urgent action to mitigate impacts on the climate and the environment. This requires a clear roadmap for a just transition over the coming decades. Energy-intensive industries, in particular, will deliver the most effective levers to reduce CO2 emissions on a large scale.

It is clear that all industrial sectors will need to undergo profound change, which is already happening in some areas. In addition to waste reduction through implementation of the circular economy and industrial symbiosis criteria, preservation of the environment, sustainable production and the protection of people and workers’ health remain key elements for decarbonising our future.

EU raw materials sector: the EESC calls for the digitalisation of mining to make European industrial supply chains more resilient

Securing sustainable access to raw materials, including metals, industrial minerals and raw materials for construction, particularly critical raw materials, is of huge importance to the European economy, in which at least 30 million jobs depend on the availability of raw materials. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the importance of digital transformation.

At its September plenary session, and at a crucial time for the implementation of the Green Deal and the EU recovery plan, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion on Digital Mining in Europe: New solutions for the sustainable production of raw materials.

In the opinion, the EESC recommends the digitalisation of the EU raw materials sector as a unique opportunity to make European industrial supply chains more resilient, to improve the environmental performance of the minerals sector and to increase transparency and dialogue with citizens and communities affected by mining activities.

The EESC highlights the importance of having a global, comprehensive minerals intelligence network to underpin the digital transformation and informed decision-making at EU level. The Joint Research Centre is currently developing and maintaining a European raw materials information system, as acknowledged by the EESC.

"The digital transformation of the mining sector requires an ambitious effort to enact legal and regulatory changes, and that effort should be made under the umbrella of supranational organisations and at international law level."

Marian Krzaklewski, rapporteur

"Mining companies which embraced the digital transition have recorded improvements in terms of safety, sustainability, productivity and profits. More specifically, blockchain represents the future in this area, but its governance needs to be discussed and established. In addition, we need to minimise the social and territorial imbalances brought about by the transformation of activities and in the broader framework of the new Green Deal and circular economy changes."

Pietro De Lotto, President for the EESC’s Consultative Commission on Industrial Change
Considering the challenges posed by digitalisation and the threats to the mineral raw materials industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the co-rapporteur for the opinion, Hilde Van Laere, calls on the European Commission to promote a comprehensive dialogue process among the social partners through the existing sectoral social dialogue mechanism.

The EESC believes that the EU and the Member States must actively support the digital transformation of the EU mining sector. This is a crucial step in making EU industry and the raw materials value chain more resilient. Mines using digital technologies, including integrated automation, cognitive networks and real-time analytics, are more efficient, clean and safe. Smaller environmental footprints and safer environments are easier to achieve in ‘smart mines’, and this is crucial for obtaining the ‘social licence’ to operate in Europe.

Developing sustainable batteries in the EU

The topic of batteries in the EU is a cross-cutting issue that involves many different policy fields, from the sustainability and competitiveness of strategic value-chains, to the electrification of transport and the development of energy storage.

The EESC has always been at the forefront of promoting the development of sustainable batteries in the EU. It is a strategic factor for the decarbonisation of transport and for a clean energy transition and is an essential component of the EU’s circular economy approach.

The EESC welcomed the creation of a European Battery Alliance and the Strategic Action Plan on Batteries. However, the Committee noted that greater efforts are needed to achieve the necessary level of technological expertise in the EU, to secure the supply of raw materials from third countries and EU sources and to ensure that batteries can be recycled safely and cleanly.

The EESC continued to monitor the matter closely and held a debate on batteries and critical raw materials in February 2020, with the participation of important stakeholders, to highlight the need to secure permanent access to raw materials as soon as possible, in order to develop a strong battery industry for electric vehicles. In March 2020, the need for a new regulatory framework for batteries, already envisaged in the Strategic Action Plan for Batteries and under the European Green Deal, was acknowledged by the Commission in the new Circular Economy Action Plan and Industrial Strategy launched. Furthermore, in September 2020, the Commission presented its communication on Critical Raw Materials Resilience, which addressed the challenge posed by the use of critical raw materials in the batteries value chain. Finally, the new proposal for a regulation concerning batteries and waste batteries was adopted by the Commission in December 2020.

For our sustainable future, we need to consider the whole battery lifespan and equip ourselves with the resources needed. European businesses can only become a major player in battery development and deployment in the global market by taking a huge leap forward over the next few years.

Pierre-Jean Coulon, former President of the EESC’s Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society
The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform
3 years on – the next level with a new mandate

With the European Green Deal as the EU’s sustainable strategy for growth and the COVID-19 outbreak exposing the fragility of the current economic model, the circular economy presents an economic model that keeps resources in the economy for longer. It also ensures that production and consumption remain within limits that are acceptable for our planet. In order to achieve these objectives and continue with the transition, the Commission has adopted a new Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP) for a cleaner and more competitive Europe. The CEAP is at the core of the European Green Deal, announcing a series of actions to change production and consumption patterns in Europe, with a focus on preventing waste in the first place. However, the transition to a circular economy can only be implemented with the active engagement of civil society and the businesses, workers and consumers it represents.

Proposed by the EESC in its 2016 opinion on the Circular Economy Package, and set up jointly by the Commission and the Committee in 2017, the Platform’s mandate was renewed in November 2020 to continue serving as a ‘network of networks’, going beyond sector-specific activities and highlighting cross-sectoral opportunities and challenges. The Platform also serves as a model for linking policy and practice in the field of the circular economy. It is essentially a knowledge-gathering hub, a place for dialogue and a bridge between existing initiatives, helping to disseminate the concept of the circular economy at national, regional and local level by making information more easily accessible and by providing a framework for exchange and discussion. Its aims are to:

• advance the circular economy concept in Member States, regional and local governments, civil society and businesses, and link them to the global dimension;
• strengthen the cooperation among stakeholders’ networks to facilitate the exchange of expertise and good practices in the circular economy;
• contribute to identifying social, economic and cultural barriers to the transition towards a circular economy.

Looking back on what the first mandate has delivered, these three years have seen four well-attended joint annual conferences, a Coordination Group that has delivered 50 initiatives, and a website that has received close to 300,000 visits and has brought together over 450 good practices, 44 strategies and more than 270 knowledge items. The Platform has an active presence on social media, with close to 4,000 followers on Twitter and over 1,000 on LinkedIn (launched in May 2020).
As the essential link between policy-making in Brussels and Europe’s civil society, the EESC is represented by three active EESC members, whose role is instrumental in facilitating relations with the members of the Coordination Group. Composed of 24 members selected through an open call for expressions of interest, the Coordination Group brings together circular economy stakeholders from across Europe’s businesses, trade unions and civil society; national, regional and local networks; multi-stakeholder platforms; knowledge and research communities.

On a wider scale, the annual Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference serves as an opportunity for dialogue with stakeholders, drawing together their knowledge and experience of the circular economy transition and documenting their views. Co-organised by the EESC and the Commission, this two-day conference constitutes the major EU event for stakeholder engagement on the circular economy, and with an average of 600 participants each year, the conference showcases civil society’s drivers powering the transition. The fifth European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform annual conference took place on 3-4 November 2020. This year’s main event for the circular economy in Europe went fully digital!

The Platform continues to reinforce communication on the circular economy by providing an online meeting place through its website. Driven by stakeholder contributions from across Europe and beyond, the website is being taken to the next level to reflect changes in the field of circular economy. The good practices, national and regional strategies, knowledge hub and links to other circular economy platforms from the previous mandate have been retained and new areas are being developed. The website also continues to act as the go-to place for circular economy news and events in Europe.
MORE SUSTAINABLE TRADE – INTEGRATING THE GREEN AND DIGITAL TRANSITIONS

In the midst of major paradigm changes, international trade has reached a re-defining moment, with the need to address issues such as the green and digital transitions. The EU is tackling these challenges at all levels – unilaterally, bilaterally and multilaterally – and the EESC is definitely playing its part. Over the past year, the EESC’s sections have worked hand in hand to infuse more sustainability into all relevant files. The sections have combined forces on several issues, such as trade and the Green Deal, Sustainable Supply Chains and decent work in international trade, mandatory due diligence, and the circular economy. The EESC has continued to support the work of the Domestic Advisory Groups and other civil society mechanisms to ensure trade deals deliver for civil society, notably on the ambitions for Trade and Sustainable Development.

Global supply chains play a major role in economic activities and trade around the world. The COVID-19 crisis has shown their fragility. It has also exposed the vulnerability of workers and the adverse social, health and safety impacts of business operations in today’s supply chains. In its exploratory opinion, the EESC provides a detailed assessment of sustainable supply chains and makes wide-ranging recommendations. The opinion calls for an ambitious European action plan comprising legislative and other initiatives, with cross-sectoral EU legislation on due diligence regarding human rights and responsible business conduct at its heart. The EESC considers the EU to be uniquely placed to take the lead on due diligence, in particular with a view to European companies’ global leadership.

At international level, the EESC stresses the urgent need to close gaps in governance. This means, for instance, supporting a UN Binding treaty on business and human rights and establishing an ILO Convention on decent work in supply chains. By nature, trade policy must be a crucial component of the COVID-19 recovery, and one of its key tasks must be the effective enforceability and full enforcement of trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). TSD chapters form an increasingly important part in all new-generation EU FTAs and the EESC emphasises that the impact of Domestic Advisory Group recommendations on investigating TSD violations needs to be considerably strengthened.

Some of this opinion’s new approaches include linking the reduction of trade tariffs to genuine progress on TSD implementation and requiring investors to comply with due diligence before benefiting from investment agreements, to name but a few.

As the voice of civil society, the EESC is well placed to propose a fair balance between necessary legal requirements in the field of human and labour rights, transparency, the fight against corruption and the necessary flexibility of multinational enterprises to organise and develop their GSCs in an effective manner suited to the various local situations.

Emmanuelle Butaud-Stubbs, rapporteur for the opinion on Decent work in global supply chains

Ambitious actions need to ensure that GSCs contribute to a fairer economic and social model, based on sustainability and decent work. Trade will have to play a key role in promoting a sustainable economic recovery, but stronger instruments need to deliver on a socially and environmentally responsible business, trade and investment agenda.

Tanja Buzek, rapporteur for the opinion on Sustainable supply chains
In May 2017, the EESC was among the first EU institutions to present an own-initiative opinion on the impact of AI on society (Artificial Intelligence – The consequences of artificial intelligence on the (digital) single market, production, consumption, employment and society), and introduced the concept of the ‘human-in-command approach’ when it comes to the development of AI technologies. In the following years, other major EESC opinions stressed the role of the sustainable development framework in guiding the future evolution of AI. In July 2020, the EESC adopted its opinion on the Commission’s White Paper on AI, in which it also affirms that EU law should set safe boundaries for high-risk AI applications.

Between 2018 and 2020, AI-related issues were tackled in the Temporary Study Group on AI. This group worked, among other things, on a report focusing on civil society participation in shaping national AI strategies. The purpose of this analysis was to assess whether and how civil society in selected Member States has been involved in the preparation of national AI strategies. The final report was published in September 2020 and was shared with the EU institutions and other stakeholders.

A new Observatory for the Digital Transition and the Single Market was set up in October 2020 and now coordinates the strategy in the EESC’s work on AI. One of its tasks will be to organise the next AI Europe/Stakeholder summit in the second half of 2021. This summit was supposed to have taken place in April 2020, but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Catelijne Muller, EESC member

“AI techniques and approaches to fight the pandemic should be just as robust, effective, transparent and explainable as any other AI technique in any other situation. They should uphold human rights, ethical principles and legislation. They should also be voluntary, because, whether we like it or not, many techniques introduced during the crisis will become permanent.”

Catelijne Muller, EESC member
FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE EU

In 2020, the EESC followed up on its landmark report on the real rights of persons with disabilities to vote in European elections with an own-initiative opinion (The need to guarantee real rights for persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections). Its aim was to put forward recommendations to stop discrimination of voters with disabilities based on their nationality or country of residence, as national rules differ considerably from one country to another. The opinion also recommended measures to remove legal or technical barriers currently in place, depriving millions of their voting rights.

The EESC warned that if no such legal changes were made, the number of citizens potentially deprived of this right would continue to steadily rise, as the share of people with some sort of disability increases with the ageing population.

In the EESC’s view, existing practices that discriminate against EU citizens with disabilities could be quickly removed by amending the 1976 Electoral Act. The principle of universal suffrage should include a statement saying that no EU citizen may be deprived of their right to vote in EP elections because of a disability or health condition on the basis of national regulations.

The principles of the directness and secrecy of the elections referred to in the Act should also be made clearer. The EESC suggested a number of additional measures that EU Member States should take to achieve voting rights for all. If all these rules and additional measures were implemented, the 2024 EU elections would be truly universal and accessible to all.

The EESC considers such discrimination to be unacceptable and contrary to the fundamental values of the EU, to the Treaty and to major international legal and political acts.

Krzysztof Pater, rapporteur

What we are asking has to do with the principle of equal rights for all. How is it possible that in the 21st century, there are still millions of people who cannot enjoy their right to vote and decision makers are doing nothing about it? This is a key issue for EU democracy and a matter of human dignity.

Krzysztof Pater, rapporteur
"L'economia circolare ha bisogno di una visione utopica". Colloquio con Citlán López (Cese)
FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION

The health crisis drastically affected communication in 2020 and a large number of events and activities – such as Europe Day, visits and the communication activities linked to the EESC’s new term of office – were conducted online. Particularly noteworthy for 2020 are the activities and projects related to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, such as the publication gathering over 40 contributions from EESC members from all 27 Member States presenting their views and experiences on the health crisis, and the growing use of podcasts and video messages, while webinars were used for the first time at the EESC during the initial lockdown and rapidly became a very popular communication tool.
SAY HI TO NEW EESC LOGO!

In October 2019, the EESC adopted a new logo that reflects the logos of the other EU institutions, with the EU flag in the middle and a grey element that alludes to the EESC’s three groups and their dynamic way of reaching consensus.

You can now find this new logo on all EESC communication tools.

THE EESC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook: www.eesc.europa.eu/facebook
Twitter: www.eesc.europa.eu/twitter
Instagram: www.instagram.com/eu_civilsociety
You Tube: www.eesc.europa.eu/youtube
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/european-economic-and-social-committee

Follow us!

To make the most of all possible opportunities for dialogue with the European public, the EESC also has a social media presence, concentrating on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. Plenary debates can be followed on social media via @EU_EESC or by using the hashtag #EESCplenary.

By the end of 2020, the EESC reached two milestones as regards follower numbers on its social media corporate accounts: over 50 000 followers on Twitter, over 30 000 on LinkedIn (more than doubling in 2020) and 36 600 on Facebook, while the one-year old Instagram account also saw rapid growth, reaching 3 700 by the end of the year.

You can also watch the new EESC series of podcasts on The Grassroots View and EESC in a flash – a series of two-minute online interviews with an EESC member who comments on a topical matter.
EESC is on Instagram!

"We bring civil society together in Europe"

Our Instagram account @eu_civilsociety is celebrating its first birthday with almost 4000 followers. We thank all of you who have followed our account, interacted with us and shared your stories.

For those who haven’t followed us just yet, this is a channel where we present the EESC’s work in a visually appealing way, with a spotlight on our members. It was launched as a less formal platform, a channel bringing us closer to younger audiences.

Follow @eu_civilsociety for a look #InsideEESC! Discover our growing series of members’ portraits #EESC_members and the fantastic world of art exhibitions we host in #EESC_culture. Get updates on our work in areas that interest young Europeans, such as climate change, youth engagement, circular economy, environment, education and many other topics.

www.eesc.europa.eu/instagram/

Follow us!

@eu_civilsociety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Facebook followers</th>
<th>Twitter followers</th>
<th>Linkedin followers</th>
<th>Instagram followers*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>36 664</td>
<td>50 351</td>
<td>31 345</td>
<td>3 712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>32 600</td>
<td>43 300</td>
<td>14 500</td>
<td>1 105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>24 486</td>
<td>36 634</td>
<td>9 407</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20 674</td>
<td>31 053</td>
<td>7 829</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>16 352</td>
<td>25 303</td>
<td>6 728</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NEW since October 2019
WIDER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, FROM SCHOOL VISITS TO HOSTING GROUPS

As well as members meeting citizens in their own countries, the EESC actively encourages people from all over Europe to come to Brussels and see for themselves how it represents their interests. Although the pandemic prevented the EESC welcoming visitors as usual, the implementation of a system for virtual visits allowed visitors and groups to be welcomed online, as well as a remarkable increase of the EESC’s outreach through web and social media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visitors</th>
<th>Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2 371*</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>11 144</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>9 419</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>7 847</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7 371</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is the number of visitors welcomed physically (until February) and online in 2020, mostly members of civil society organisations and students specialising in European affairs. Even though the pandemic resulted in an exceptional stark drop of visits, the online Open Day on 9 May 2020 generated 700 visits of the event web page, and resulted in a potential reach of 3.2 million and 3 300 interactions on the EESC’s.

Top 5 events on EESC social media in 2020

- Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference
- EESC Renewal
- European Citizens’ Initiative Day
- Shaping the EU agenda for disability rights 2020-2030
- Europe Day

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most events in their traditional form had to be cancelled, therefore the list includes mostly those events which were held online.
PRESS ACTIVITIES

The pandemic has not stopped the media activity of EESC members. One of the first media reactions involving members of the EESC presidency was to produce a video message showing unity and solidarity with the other institutions and civil society in the fight against the pandemic. The video, which was published on social media, aroused great interest among viewers on 23 April 2020.

“I am Luca Jahier.
I am Isabel Caño.
Hi, I am Stefano Mallia.
My name is Oliver Röpke.
And I am Arno Metzler.
Together, we represent civil society at European Union level. The lockdown cannot prevent us from working actively to get the voice of organised civil society heard. United we stay strong to take back our lives. Whatever it takes. The outbreak of the coronavirus will have serious consequences for our society. No government can possibly think to solve such a crisis alone. We call for fast, decisive and effective action at EU level. Now, exceptional measures and policy coherence are urgently needed. We have to do whatever is necessary to enable and support our people and to encourage them to continue with all the efforts they have made in guarding citizens’ interest and humanity on European and national level. Now, we are either a Union or we are nothing!”
2020 CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

In the EESC, we strongly believe that culture has a transformative power, crucial for building a sustainable future and for that reason, we invest in culture as the path to achieve it.

The EESC’s cultural activities are mainly considered as a communication tool and as such they are meant to highlight and promote the work done in the EESC by its members, sections, and groups.

Under the unprecedented circumstances in 2020, the majority of the EESC cultural activities became virtual. This element provided an opportunity to develop a modern and more comprehensive approach. The use of social media was extended and the online visualization of cultural activities turned out to become an effective tool to promote our events.

The EESC organised eight cultural events in 2020, only three of which were held in person. Activities ranged from photo and painting exhibitions to a short-film screening. Major events were presented online and jointly organized with the EESC’s sections, or in conjunction to the Committee’s plenary session. They are part of the EESC’s drive to frame a positive narrative for Europe.
Cultural highlights of the year

Stasys Eidrigevičius. *A collection of small pieces of happiness* – an art exhibition organised with the support of the Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the EU. Its opening ceremony in the presence of the artist gathered an audience of 200 participants.

Refuge: *Private worlds in exile* – a virtual photo exhibition organised in partnership with the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship to highlight the work done by the EESC on migration policies, also in relation to the EU Migration Pact.

*To Be and Not to Be (in Corona times)* – a short-film première which took place during the EESC’s December plenary session as part of the annual commemorative event organised on 3 December to highlight the EESC’s work on issues that concern persons with disabilities.
### SOME KEY FIGURES AND DATES FOR 2020

2020 was a very special year for the European Economic and Social Committee as for the world in general. Some of the figures below will show how the pandemic impacted the whole EESC activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>27-29 October 2020</th>
<th>The 555th EESC’s plenary session inaugurated the EESC members’ new term of office (from 2020 until 2025)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Members are nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council of the European Union for a renewable five-year term of office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137 41.64%</td>
<td>New members that were welcomed to the EESC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108 32.82%</td>
<td>Female members at the EESC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>Number of opinions, position papers and information reports adopted in 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>702</td>
<td>Total staff in the EESC’s administration, managed by the secretary-general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 May 2020</td>
<td>Start of the first remote plenary session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>562</td>
<td>Number of meetings organised remotely between mid-March and end of December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.52 million</td>
<td>Number of page views of the EESC’s website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Number of trainees who completed a paid traineeship. Twice a year the EESC offers paid internships to give young graduates valuable work experience. In 2020, due to the lockdowns, not all selected trainees managed to come and some of them decided to terminate their traineeship early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Amount of plastic in the EESC’s canteen: this is the first EU institution canteen to go plastic-free. Disposable plastic and plastic packaging are no longer used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-52%</td>
<td>Percentage of reduction in paper consumption compared with 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-70%</td>
<td>Percentage reduction in waste compared with 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each year, the Committees (EESC and CoR altogether) make considerable efforts to respect their environmental commitments. 2020 saw most staff teleworking, thus managing drastic reductions.
| **€142.5 million** | The EESC’s **total budget**
    | Accuracy, efficiency and accountability are key to a balanced budget, validated by the Commission and adopted by the European Council and Parliament |
| **€230 000** | Total value of the one-off **EESC civil solidarity prize Civil society against COVID-19**, which in 2020 exceptionally replaced the traditional EESC Civil Society Prize and rewarded not-for-profit initiatives carried out by individuals, civil society organisations or private companies to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and its manifold consequences |
| **7 July 2020** | **70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration**
    | • Schuman ceremony (event)
    | • Inauguration of the Schuman Space
| **11 December 2020** | … and much more |
USEFUL LINKS

EESC website:
www.eesc.europa.eu

Facebook:
www.eesc.europa.eu/facebook

Twitter:
www.eesc.europa.eu/twitter

Instagram:
www.instagram.com/eu_civilsociety

YouTube:
www.eesc.europa.eu/youtube

LinkedIn:
www.linkedin.com/company/european-economic-and-social-committee

EESC president’s website:
www.eesc.europa.eu/president

EESC president on Twitter:
@EESC_President

Civil Solidarity Prize:
www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/civil-solidarity-prize

Civil Society Against COVID-19:

European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform:
circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/