

Ms Xhomaqi then opened the **panel discussion on the challenges in building a sustainable recovery** and gave the floor to the Vice-President of the European Commission, Dubravka Šuica. **Ms Šuica** first underlined the commitment of her institution to launch as soon as possible the Conference on the Future of Europe which is part of the European Commission's response to the challenge of making European democracy fit for a green, digital and resilient future.

She then stated that the European Parliament, Council and Commission are currently finalising a joint declaration on the goals, objectives and structure of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**. The Conference will create a new public space that is open, inclusive, transparent and structured. Its objectives are to empower citizens and bring them together into the heart of policy-making in the EU. The Vice-President of the European Commission listed three key points regarding the Conference:

- first, citizens will be free to raise any topic of concern to them in the Conference;
- secondly, the Conference will be hybrid in its design, thereby increasing accessibility. A multilingual digital platform will be the heart of the Conference, but people will be able to contribute both online and in person when the pandemic situation improves;
- thirdly, the Conference will offer the opportunity to hold national and transnational debates on the future right across the EU, as an unprecedented effective and practical feedback mechanism.

The screen was then given to **Daniel Freund**, member of the European Parliament, who regretted the fact that the EP had not been able to hold any direct meetings with civil society during the last year. He pointed out that the way to engage directly in person again with citizens is through vaccination. As much as the vaccine is now the only route out of the pandemic, Europe is the answer to this, as well as to other continental or global challenges that we are currently facing. Whether it is climate change, digitalisation or large companies not paying their fair share of taxes in Europe, no single Member State can find the answer to all these issues alone - only the European Union can give answers collectively.

Mr Freund stated that the European Parliament wants to learn from experience. What happened in particular with the Constitutional treaty (which then led to the Treaty of Lisbon) teaches a core lesson: involving citizens from the outside is essential. Looking at the experiences with citizens' assemblies in Ireland and climate conventions in France, He argued that the EP wants to run a similar randomly selected citizens' approach at EU level because Europe needs a European debate on European solutions.

After Mr Freund stated his views, the moderator gave the screen back to EESC President, **Christa Schweng**, asking her to go into further detail about the role of civil society in the recovery process and in the future of the European process, since the EESC had very recently adopted a resolution on this matter. The EESC president noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated pre-existing vulnerabilities: despite the many useful measures taken, the EU now had 1.7 million more unemployed people compared to 2019 - this figure includes an increase of 400 000 unemployed young people.

Ms Schweng pointed out that last month, the European Council adopted a regulation establishing an EUR 672.5 billion Recovery and Resilience Facility, which is at the heart of the EU recovery. The Member States now need to prepare national recovery and resilience plans and in this context they need to consult organised civil society. The EESC was happy about this requirement in the regulation because involving the social partners and other civil society organisations will create real ownership of the plans and facilitate their successful implementation.

To this end, the EESC recently adopted a resolution on the involvement of organised civil society in national recovery and resilience plans. Ms Schweng stated that the Committee has mobilised its members in the 27 Member States and has worked with National Economic and Social Councils to look at the extent of civil society participation in the design of the plans, at the quality of its involvement and at the whole transparency of the process. The conclusion reached by the EESC was that the level of actual participation of civil society organisations in national plans is still largely insufficient. The EESC's aim was to issue recommendations while it is still possible for the Member States to correct the situation. At a later stage, EESC members will assess whether the funds have been spent properly.

The next panellist was **Nathan Méténier**, member of the UN General Secretary's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, who pointed out that the youth movements are calling for recovery plans to be green and fair: the transition needs to be driven by young people and by marginalised communities. Mr Méténier argued that recovery plans are not here to bail out a handful of companies – conditions should be attached to use of the funds.

Mr Méténier acknowledged that the youth climate movement is pushing for more action, but also noted a tremendous lack of support. The movement is in need of funding, especially for those outside the EU (e.g. in the Balkans, Eastern Europe countries, Northern Europe and in indigenous communities), whose voices were not being heard. Mr Méténier called on the European Commission to do much better in terms of public participation and he called for the EP to do better when it comes to involving young people, pointing out that perhaps it is time for a real youth Parliament dialogue on social issues, economic issues and green policies.

Since the last panellist João Labrincha, member of Academia Cidadã, was having technical issues and could not join the discussion, **Ms Xhomaqi** put the following question to all panellists: "**Before even talking about their involvement, how would you ensure that citizens are fully informed about Europe's sustainable recovery or the Future of Europe discussion process? Do you have any practical ideas as to how this can be done by the EU institutions?**"

- **Ms Šuica** was the first to take the screen, referring to Article 11 on the Treaty of the EU, which states that "Institutions shall always exchange their views in all areas of Union action". The European Commission Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER) encourages governments to develop reform plans in direct consultations with stakeholders, including civil society organisations. The European Commission is strongly committed to promoting citizen-centred initiatives, to supporting participatory democracy and to co-creating policies with citizens.

- **Mr Freund** pointed out that the EU's recovery has been the core focal point of media coverage and so citizens are well informed about NextGenerationEU. It is now important that citizens see what projects are actually funded by the EU. It is crucial that citizens find out that the Conference on the Future of Europe is taking place and the EU institutions have to work together to make that happen. Throughout the process, the aim should be full transparency: all debates should be webstreamed and all documents should be available online. The process has to be serious in order to get people interested in it: if people have the impression that they are really shaping the future of Europe, in a process that involves more than just talk, then naturally they will engage in debates.

- **Ms Schweng** suggested that the Conference on the Future of Europe can be an opportunity for civil society organisations to learn how EU works in reality, since there are still so many misconceptions about this in some Member States. It could be useful to see not only the complexity of the EU but also that there are institutions working for citizens and doing the best they can. After the online chat, the following issues were raised: "How can civil society organisations pressure their respective governments to take them on board in national recovery plans?" and "How can fundamental rights be defended in a shrinking civil space where freedoms have been eroded since the start of the pandemic?".

- **Mr Méténier** replied that the EU should set an example for its Member States. Grassroots organisations need funds, but funders often consider them to be inefficient or untrustworthy. Mr Méténier also remarked that there is still a huge lack of knowledge about the EU recovery plan, probably due to the fact that the EU is still using a top-down approach. Only inviting citizens to participate in dialogue is not participation; it's just tokenism, since citizens are still not part of the actual decision-making and they don't have real ownership of the decisions.

- **Ms Šuica** pointed out that, on the Conference on the Future of Europe, the idea is not just to have dialogue with but to listen to citizens and to hear their ideas, hopes, fears, proposals and to take all of them into account. This idea of the Conference is receiving more coverage now and is more important than ever, during the pandemic, but it has been on the European Commission's agenda since December 2019. The Conference has not yet started, but Ms Šuica is hopeful it soon will.

There were then a few direct comments from participants in the Interactio virtual room. **Lech Pilawski**, an EESC member, generally agreed with Mr Méténier and stated that it is important to strengthen civil society in a deliberative democracy. In Europe, politicians often only talk to citizens during election campaigns and then forget about their voters after the elections. In the follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, it will therefore be very important to achieve concrete results.

Philippe Seidel, a member of the Secretariat of AGE Platform Europe, pointed out that this has been the most difficult year since his organisation started working with the European Semester. Although there is ambition for more transparency, this has not been put into practice. In addition, Mr Seidel emphasised the risk of leaving behind many people who are not keeping pace with the economy, such as older workers who have lost their job during the pandemic or who will lose their job because of the changes that have taken place.

In the virtual room, **Luk Zelderloo**, secretary general of EASPD and President of Social Services Europe, took the screen to draw attention to the thousands of European citizens who are committed and active in non-profit organisations, without aiming to achieve any financial return. This should be supported and recognised by institutions when talking about the future of Europe, because these people are the social capital that helps society to recover, even after COVID-19.

The moderator linked Mr Zelderloo's comment with a question from the audience in Slido.com: "**How would the EU social funds' investment for capacity building in civil society actually be ensured?**". Since there was also a great deal of discussion about philanthropy in the Interactio chat, Ms Xhomaqi gave the screen to **Hanna Surmatz**, Enabling Environment Manager for the European Foundation Centre, who emphasised the need for principles of non-discrimination to work in practice, to enable cross border philanthropy and to create a European single market for non-profit actors, too. The recovery and resilience facility is important, but national governments have not really reached out to civil society and philanthropy, so maybe there is a need for a little more push from the EU.

The last participant to take the screen was **Javier Doz Orrit**, member of the EESC, who predicted that civil society organisations will call for more democracy and integration at the Conference on the Future of Europe, and wondered how the EESC will be included in the Conference as well.

Ms Xhomaqi then put a final question to the speakers at the opening session: "**What is the successful ingredient for making the recovery of Europe just, fair and sustainable for all citizens, with no one left behind?**".

Ms Schweng took the screen to reply to the question raised by Mr Doz Orrit. The EESC president stated that the Committee would only attend the Conference on the Future of Europe as an observer on the executive board, when appropriate. Ms Schweng made it clear, however, that she would use all her speaking opportunities to state that organised civil society should always have a place at the negotiating table. Even if not everybody from civil society is represented in the EESC, there is the Liaison Group, which will be included in the talks about how to best cooperate with the executive board of the Conference, once it is finally established.

Mr Méténier pointed out that stronger social cohesion is crucial for facing the climate and social crisis, but it's not just individual action that matters, since much of the responsibility is in the hands of decision-makers and polluting industries.

The opening session ended with Ms Xhomaqi inviting all participants and audience to connect to **Slido.com** to answer a number of surveys on the main topics of Civil Society Days 2021. "In one word, what does the **Future of Europe** mean to you?": here, among many answers, the main key-words were **freedom, solidarity** and **cooperation**. "In one word, what does **Sustainable Recovery** mean to you?": the main key-words were **green future** and **democracy**.