



European Economic  
and Social Committee

**Speech by Christa Schweng,  
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**Inaugural plenary session, 29 October 2020  
EP Paul-Henri Spaak Hemicycle / remote**

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**Dear President Sassoli,  
Dear President Michel,  
Dear President von der Leyen,**

**Your Excellencies,  
Dear Members of the European Economic and Social Committee,  
Dear Guests,  
Dear Friends,**

Sitting in front of a screen is not exactly how we had pictured this inaugural session. You may be asking yourselves why, as the new president, I am also participating remotely. Believe me, it was not easy for me to decide not to travel to Brussels. The reason for my decision is simple: we can only ask our people, our members and staff to limit their social interactions and change their everyday behaviour to fight the COVID-19 pandemic if we ourselves set an example. That is why I have decided to adopt a "safety first" approach and to participate remotely, so that I do not put anybody at risk.

I would like to start with a personal recollection. I became a Committee member in 1998. I still remember my first day and my thoughts at the time. I felt a bit lost and wondered how all these policies would work. How could I contribute to making the EU better: I imagine many of you, especially our new members, are familiar with that feeling. 22 years later, my motivation remains the same as on that first day.

The European Economic and Social Committee plays a key role in making the voice of organised civil society heard at European level. Thanks to the input of organised civil society, European policies can

reflect the situation on the ground more accurately and can be implemented more effectively at national or local level.

Hands-on experience of employers, workers, consumers, farmers and NGOs is *a must* to shape Europe for the better. We act as a bridge: we need to deliver on that role, and I am convinced we can.

Let's be honest: in recent months, the Committee could have had a better press. We need to act immediately to restore both the EESC's and our own reputations and rebuild trust and credibility both externally and in-house. We need a Committee that is **united and meets the highest ethical and professional standards**, a Committee with an **excellent image**. This is why I will ask you today to give a mandate to the advisory body to reinforce the Committee's Code of Conduct for Members and the Rules of Procedure. We need to do this as quickly as possible, and certainly before January 2021.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

I would now like to present to you the priorities of my presidency. I would like to thank all those who provided valuable input to this programme. My motto is **United for the future of Europe** and I would be very pleased if this programme could become OUR programme, the Programme of the European Economic and Social Committee for the next 2.5 years.

**First and foremost, we need to tackle the economic and social hardship caused by COVID-19.** The ongoing pandemic has triggered the worst recession since the Second World War and is deepening inequalities. Above all, the **Member States and our society as a whole need to recover and become more resilient.**

**Our working methods during this term of office** will be marked by **COVID-19**. Until a vaccine is available and widely accepted, our “new normal” will continue to be social distancing, wearing masks, hybrid or remote meetings and interrupted business activities.

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.**

**What is my vision for post COVID-19 Europe?**

It is a Europe that is **prospering economically, that is socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable** and that enables all civil society parties to thrive and live in an open, values-based society.

The digital and green transitions continue to be relevant topics but should be mainstreamed into every policy area. Sustainable development should be a mindset and a basis for a competitive economy, leaving nobody behind.

**I come from the Employers Group and so let me start with the economic aspect.**

As we face the second wave of the pandemic, our companies, workers and people need support to survive, recover and rebuild our economies. The Next Generation EU Recovery Plan needs to provide the funds that we need to counter the negative economic and social consequences of the pandemic. We must ensure that this support reaches those in need – be it the unemployed or businesses, especially SMEs which are struggling to survive.

However, money alone will not solve the current situation: the transition to an economy that is more digital and green after the pandemic also needs to be linked to **social recovery**.

The target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020 has clearly been missed, and so now we must redouble our efforts to make it happen. People who are able to work should do so, while the ones who are not able to work should benefit from the solidarity of society.

In addition to substantial public and private investment, we need an efficient Single Market to climb out of the crisis quickly. Remaining obstacles should be removed in order to ensure the cross-border flow of goods, services, capital, data and people. At the same time, we have to guarantee a level playing field to enable fair competition within the Single Market.

The EU has a key role to play on the global stage. We need to shape international standards to reflect European values and interests. 85% of the world's future growth is projected to take place outside the EU. 35 million European jobs depend on exports and 16 million jobs on foreign investment.

With the current pandemic, we have all seen the EU's vulnerability and dependency on suppliers outside Europe. Our businesses and future welfare will depend on our ability to maintain open markets, with free and fair trade and predictable global trading conditions.

The EESC as part of global civil society will continue to actively engage in enlargement and neighbourhood policies.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

COVID-19 has brought disruption and rapid shifts to our **labour markets**. Safeguarding employment and income for all in the labour market - whether self-employed or employees - is a priority, and we need to shape current policies by taking a long-term approach to training and skills. We need to pay particular attention to vulnerable groups like atypical workers, children in poverty, people with disabilities and people with a migrant background or from an ethnic minority, to name just a few.

**Digitalisation and artificial intelligence** have a huge impact on how we live, work, learn and interact. The digital transition needs to be just, sustainable and socially acceptable. We have to put people at the centre of digitalisation.

I truly believe that economic, social and societal progress are indivisible. The 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights serve as a compass for social convergence and a fair and sustainable recovery. As Europe shifts towards a green and digital economy, we must ensure that nobody is left behind and that social policies respond properly to the impact of transition.

Protecting those who seek **refuge** in the EU, guaranteeing their rights and providing them with hope for the future should also be one of the EU's guiding principles. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in integrating migrants, but they need to be supported with the right funding.

Talking about European values: I believe that **our common European values** are non-negotiable under any circumstances: we need respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, even in times of crisis, when certain exceptional and strictly temporary measures are needed. The rule of law is the cornerstone of the functioning of the EU but it is even more than that: together with fundamental rights, it is the face of the EU as a model of the social market economy, which we need to defend.

One of the main lessons of the COVID-19 crisis is that the health systems of almost every European country need to be strengthened, primarily by focusing on prevention. The creation of a **European health union**, entailing practical health sector cooperation between Member States coordinated by the Commission, is an important aspect of solidarity and future resilience. The development of effective treatments and a vaccine against COVID-19 as well as common standards and a coordinated system of testing should be established at EU level.

**Last but not least, we need a Europe that is environmentally sustainable.**

We know that a carbon-neutral transition will modernise industry, and create new high-quality jobs and more job opportunities. But ambitious climate-protection measures often pose a significant challenge to the businesses concerned. In the current economic downturn, it is essential to provide the best possible support to achieve recovery while enabling innovation and investment in climate and environmental protection. Businesses have to be seen as part of the solution when it comes to making efforts to green the economy. They must be encouraged to take an active part in shaping the transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy. For that, businesses need realistic targets, planning, security and flexibility when new measures to mitigate climate change are adopted.

**The motto of my presidency, United for the future of Europe, cannot be discussed without talking about the Conference on the Future of Europe.**

This conference will be a unique opportunity for European Union society. Businesses, workers, farmers, consumers and NGOs will be able to have their say in shaping future EU policies. They will have ownership over *their* European Union. People of diverse backgrounds and from all walks of life will be able to engage in a more structured debate, with the aim of improving the way the EU works.

The EESC has been committed to participatory democracy since it was set up in 1958, and now it will once again have the chance to show its added value and act as a facilitator, given that our members come from organisations that represent all parts of society and are deeply rooted in all Member States.

Major topics include the vision of Europe, the dilemma of national sovereignty versus the need to find common European solutions, national identity and cultural diversity.

I am proud that an EESC Resolution adopted in 2017 was "the first contribution to the EU-wide debate on the future of Europe". But we will not stop there. I am convinced we will make a substantial and valuable contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

**You have heard the word UNITED in my motto.**

Our main task is to make the voice of organised civil society heard at European level. To do that, we need to find **common ground** between all the groups: we are not in the EESC simply to present the views of employers or workers or NGOs. Our added value is the common denominator that we present to the European institutions and the Member States. At the same time, we know that there are red lines that we cannot cross, and which deserve mutual respect from all groups. It is not the individual interest that gives legitimacy to the Committee; it is the common understanding that we come from different countries with different backgrounds, but that our task is to work together, **united**, for the common good of the European Union. This is what makes us different from lobbyists; this is our real added value.

Our success and impact in the EU policy-making process will depend on the quality and timeliness of our work as well as on our proactive approach. We count on every rapporteur and member to follow up on opinions, engage in close dialogue with the European Parliament's rapporteurs, the Council and the Commission, and communicate with relevant stakeholders throughout the preparation of the opinion.

We can thankfully rely on the committed support of the **Committee's staff** in all services, with whom we want to work together as a team, **united**, in a spirit of **respect**, trust and mutual appreciation.

**Dear Presidents, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and friends,**

We are facing huge **challenges**, but this term of office will also give us the **opportunity** to help Europe to prosper economically and to be socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. We can bring important added value to EU policies and contribute to making them more participatory, effective and adapted to Europeans' needs.

We are committed to deliver on this goal. Together we will succeed.

**United for the Future of Europe!**