

**United for the future of Europe - Christa Schweng's presidency priorities
Term of office 2020-2023**

A vision for a stronger and more resilient post-COVID Europe

The European Union should **prosper economically, and be socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable**. It should provide sound conditions for all of civil society to thrive and live in open, values-based democracies. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) will focus on supporting the active contribution of civil society actors to this overarching vision of Europe and on providing valuable expertise to policymakers, for a more participatory Europe and policies that are more effective and which tie in better with the economic, social and civic situations on the ground.

This term of office will be marked by **COVID-19** and, sadly, by times of uncertainty and economic and social hardship, in which businesses struggle to survive and workers lose their jobs. 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.

In the current context, more than ever, we need to **join forces**, develop a vision for a new, post-COVID Europe and do our utmost to ensure a **powerful contribution from our Committee to Europe's recovery and future resilience**. This will go hand in hand with the rebuilding of a more **united, effective and highly regarded EESC**.

A Europe that is prospering economically

The current pandemic has caused the worst recession since World War II and is deepening inequalities. Above all, **Member States, enterprises, workers and societies as a whole need support to survive, recover and rebuild their economies**.

The Next Generation EU Recovery Plan needs to provide for the necessary financial means to counter the negative economic and social effects of the pandemic, but it must be ensured that the support truly reaches those in need - be it the unemployed or businesses, and especially SMEs, which are struggling to survive.

But money alone will not solve the current situation: the transition to an economy that is more digital and green after the pandemic needs to be linked to a **social recovery** as well. The target to lift 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020 has clearly been missed, so now we have to redouble our efforts to make it happen. People who are able to work should do so, while those who are not able to should benefit from the solidarity of society. The European Pillar of Social rights will serve as a compass for social convergence.

Recovery after the pandemic

In addition to substantial public and private investment, we need a **well-functioning Single Market** to emerge from the crisis quickly. Remaining obstacles need to be removed and the uninterrupted flow of goods, services, capital, data and people across borders must be ensured. At the same time, it is also necessary to guarantee a level playing field to enable

fair competition within the Single Market. During the pandemic, we have witnessed national reactions that we had thought were already a thing of the past, but the Commission has reacted quickly by providing green corridors to facilitate the flow of goods and people. In the current context, trust and confidence between Member States need to be restored.

We need:

- an effective post-COVID recovery plan to ensure public and private investment and solvency support for the survival of businesses and jobs and to facilitate transition towards a competitive, green and digital Europe;
- a modern industrial policy that includes European digital solutions;
- good conditions for innovation;
- guarantees for competitive energy costs;
- pan-European projects and investment in appropriate digital and green logistics;
- proper implementation and efficient enforcement of existing rules, while cutting the red tape, administrative burden and complexity of cross border trade, which is especially important for SMEs;
- adequate support for rural areas and maintaining quality food production in Europe;
- a capital market and banking union, while respecting the specific characteristics and key role of European banks, securing alternative sources of finance for businesses, and especially for SMES, allowing households to make the most of their savings and facilitating cross-border investments.

The digital and green transitions continue to be fully relevant topics and should be mainstreamed into every policy area. Sustainable development should become a mindset and the basis of a competitive European economy, leaving nobody behind. The efforts towards recovery should not lead us to simply restore what existed in the past: we need to improve policies and working methods, while reaping the benefits of the ongoing transitions.

As regards **taxation**, the current pandemic shows us that it is more important than ever for Member States to have secure tax revenues, to be able to invest in the people and businesses most in need. At the same time, the tax burden in the Euro area is already high. Striving for the right balance requires easing the administrative burden on citizens and companies, stepping up the fight against tax abuse and strengthening cooperation with non-EU countries. The digital economy has been growing rapidly and has created new challenges in terms of taxation. Global solutions need to be sought to ensure all companies pay their fair share of taxes.

The EU's external dimension

On the global stage, the EU has a role to play in **shaping international standards** to reflect European values and interests. 85% of the worlds' future growth is projected to take place outside the EU. 35 million European jobs depend on exports and 16 million jobs on foreign investment.

The pandemic has clearly highlighted the EU's vulnerability and its dependency on suppliers from outside the EU. Europe's business and future welfare depend to a large extent on the ability to maintain open markets underpinned by **free and fair trade** and the predictability of global trading conditions. A rules-based multilateral trading system, as well as an open, fair, inclusive and predictable international trading environment must continue to be a guiding principle for the European Union. We need to guarantee open, strategic autonomy and security of supply for the EU, even in times of crisis, by promoting a strong industrial base and resilient international supply chains. Europe needs to protect global trade rules,

ensure a level playing field, and strike a balance between strategic autonomy and openness to international trade. Shipping, for example, is a cornerstone of international trade, as it enables the import and export of affordable goods on a scale that is not possible by any other transport mode. It is thus a strategic asset, and it enables the EU to safeguard its geopolitical independence and increase its economic and industrial resilience, as well as its sovereignty.

We therefore need:

- a pro-active trade policy;
- a new relationship with the UK;
- a close partnership with Western Balkans.
- a post-2020 Eastern partnership and support;
- trade and sustainability chapters in the new FTAs with Vietnam and Singapore, as well as actively following up those FTAs already concluded;
- a stability pact for Africa;

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

A Europe that is socially inclusive

Economic, social and societal progress are inseparable. The 20 principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** serve as a compass for social convergence and for a fair and sustainable recovery. The action plan to implement the pillar, due to appear in 2021, will guide the Member States in their efforts in this area.

As part of the transition towards more greening and digitalisation, we must ensure that **nobody is left behind** and that social policies properly respond to the impact of transition. Additionally, the pandemic brought severe disruption and rapid shifts to our labour markets. Despite high unemployment, which has worsened since COVID-19, employers in some Member States still have trouble finding workers with the skills needed for their business. At the same time, highly qualified young people are finding it difficult to enter the labour market. **Matching the world of education and training** with the needs of the labour market is an ongoing challenge.

Adequate active labour market policies and **well-equipped public employment services** that are able to effectively match supply and demand on the labour market with lifelong learning may help to alleviate this situation. We need to shape today's policies with a long-term perspective in mind. **Safeguarding employment and income for all workers** is a priority, while paying particular attention to and supporting **vulnerable groups**, such as atypical workers, children in poverty, persons with disabilities, people in marginalised areas and people with a migrant or ethnic minority background.

Training

Equipping citizens with the **skills** needed to actively participate in society and in a changing world of work must be a priority. We need state-of-the-art, future-oriented and appropriate education and training systems, including dual training systems to:

- provide young people with good basic competencies, which will also enable them to acquire further specific skills and seize future opportunities; promote lifelong learning for everyone, particularly in the context of digitalisation and greening;

- preserve traditional, old skills, which gain importance for maintaining built-in and operating assets and wealth (also relevant to the circular economy), at the same time contributing to a favourable geographical distribution of work and jobs
- facilitate (re)integration into the labour market, for example, by giving unemployed people the opportunity to be trained on the job, while at the same time reducing labour costs for the employer.

Migration

The root causes of **migration**, such as conflicts, inequalities and climate change, will not disappear overnight. Therefore, Europe needs a transparent and well-managed migration and asylum strategy. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum includes 10 specific legislative and non-legislative initiatives. Protecting those who seek refuge in the EU, complying with international law and guaranteeing their rights and life prospects and those of their families should be the guiding principles. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in the integration of migrants, but need to be supported and equipped with the right funding. Sharing their best practices at EU level, which can be facilitated by the EESC, facilitates mutual learning between Member States.

A European Health Union

One of the main lessons of the coronavirus crisis is that the **health systems** of practically every European country need to be strengthened, primarily by focusing on prevention. Practical cooperation in the health sector between Member States, coordinated by the Commission, is an important aspect of solidarity and future resilience. Cooperation has included measures such as the procurement and supply of healthcare equipment and services for protection, rescue, treatment and care, for example, under the RescEU programme for civil protection. The development of effective treatments and a vaccine against COVID-19, as well as common standards and coordinated testing systems, should be established at the EU level. The EU institutions should have the necessary competence and authority to coordinate the supply and distribution of essential medical and protective equipment within the Single Market.

Fundamental rights and the rule of law

The European Union is based on **common European values**, which are non-negotiable under any circumstances: respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Even in times of crisis, when certain exceptional and time-limited measures are needed, these cannot go against the rule of law and cannot endanger democracy, the separation of powers or the fundamental rights of European citizens. Nor is it acceptable that the space for civil society organisations is shrinking in some Member States. 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 for a social market economy, which needs to be defended.

Respect for diversity is one of the fundamental principles of the EU. This applies to the richness of cultures and natural features across countries. Respect for diversity also applies to issues of gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, age, religion and beliefs and any other personal characteristic.

A Europe that is environmentally sustainable

The **green transformation**, together with digitalisation, will be the driving force of the recovery plan for Europe. The ecological transition will help modernise industry and create new high-quality jobs and more job opportunities.

However, ambitious climate-protection measures often represent significant challenges for businesses. Therefore, in the current context of economic downturn, it is essential to provide the best possible support to achieve recovery, at the same time enabling innovation and investment in climate and environmental protection. Businesses need realistic targets, planning, security and flexibility when new measures to mitigate climate change are adopted, in order to remain competitive and provide jobs.

In the efforts to achieve a greener economy, business has to be considered as part of the solution and must be encouraged to play an active part in shaping the transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy. Enterprises should be guided by the concept of a "**just transition**". A "sustainable company" with a strong "workers' voice", where information and consultation rights are guaranteed, is a key actor. Enabling employees and works councils to actively engage in implementing company policies driven by the concept of the "sustainable company for a just transition" provides good prospects for decent workplaces, decent working conditions in healthy environments and regions worth living in.

Putting people at the centre of digitalisation

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) are having a huge impact on how we live, work, learn and interact. Digital transition needs to be just, sustainable and socially acceptable. We need a European, **human-centred approach** to digitalisation, and we need to seize the opportunities offered by digitalisation. At the same time, we should build a genuine European Dataspace, protecting our data and ensuring privacy and self-determination. European technological sovereignty should not be defined in a way that excludes or conflicts with others, as we need global cooperation and benefit from it. European legislation must keep pace with technological progress and investment in future skills and technologies is of the utmost importance.

Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique opportunity for society in the European Union. Businesses, workers, farmers, consumers and NGOs will be able to have their say in shaping future EU policies, which will give them a sense of ownership of *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 functioning of the EU.

Committed to participatory democracy since its establishment in 1958, the EESC has the opportunity to show its added value and act as a facilitator, as our members come from organisations that represent all parts of society and are active on the ground in all Member States.

The Conference should be used to develop the different dimensions of bridging between:

- civil society actors;
- civil society and policymakers;
- between true-life actors and organisations;
- national and EU-level actors.

Major topics could in particular cover: a vision of the Europe we hope to achieve, the dilemma of national sovereignty versus the need to find common European solutions, national identity and cultural diversity.

The Committee adopted a resolution on the future of Europe back in 2017. This was a response to the Commission's White Paper of that year, which outlined five possible scenarios for how the EU27 could evolve by 2025. We were proud that the EESC resolution was "the first contribution to the EU-wide debate on the future of Europe". We are committed to making a substantial and valuable contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The European Economic and Social Committee - rebuilding trust within the EESC and restoring the Committee's external reputation

It is of the utmost importance that the EESC restore its reputation and regain trust and credibility, both externally, in the eyes of the other EU institutions and the public and, at the same time, internally, among its members and staff. An EESC that is **united, meets with the highest ethical and professional standards**, and which enjoys the **best external reputation** will make members and staff proud to work for our institution.

All necessary efforts, measures and actions will be taken immediately, in a fully transparent and consistent way to:

- revise and strengthen the EESC Rules of Procedure and Code of conduct, considering the European Parliament's recommendations and the OLAF and European Ombudsman's reports, ensuring decent working conditions for staff and members, including with regard to health,
- bring back trust and cohesion among the three groups, members and staff, working together in a team spirit and striving to achieve consensus.

The Committee's key role is to make the voice of organised civil society heard at the European level. In order to fulfil our task, we need to reaffirm the importance of finding **common ground among the three EESC groups**: we are not in the EESC to simply present the views of employers or workers or NGOs. Our added value lies in the fact that we achieve a common denominator, which we present to the European institutions and the Member States, while observing the red lines that we cannot cross and which deserve mutual respect from all groups. The individual interest does not give **legitimacy** to our institution - it is the common understanding that we come from different nationalities with different backgrounds, but that our task and commitment is to work for the European common good.

The EESC is the only link between the EU's political authority and organised civil society. The closer involvement of civil society and true-life actors in discussions at both national and EU levels brings **added value to policy-making** and makes it more democratic, effective and in line with citizens' needs.

We will work on the main tool that we have, the **opinions**, to improve the way we prepare them and communicate them to the European institutions. Close cooperation with the European Commission even before the publication of new proposals, as well as the swift drafting of opinions, will allow us to make our views heard in a timely manner. All members are invited to adopt a pro-active and systematic approach to following up on our opinions. We will put in place a structured dialogue with the EP rapporteurs and the Council and will communicate with relevant stakeholders.

The EESC can also demonstrate, through its **impact assessments**, how European legislation and programmes are implemented on the ground and are perceived by civil society organisations in the Member States. We can monitor the implementation of EU policies, and show whether or not the EU is delivering on its promises and point out possible inappropriate policies and procedures, while making recommendations for improvement.

The EESC can furthermore play an important role as a trusted partner in the processes of the European Semester, where the voices of civil society can be channelled. This could help raise the EESC's visibility at the national level.

Simplifying procedures by making the best use of the opportunities provided by digitalisation and increasing transparency need also be on our agenda.

Based on this programme, the next term of office will give us the opportunity to help Europe prosper economically and be socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. We are committed to meeting this challenge.

Together we will succeed.

United for the Future of Europe!