

Christa Schweng, new President of the EESC: "The input of civil society is a must to shape Europe for the better";



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) closed its October plenary session, the first of its new term of office, with an online debate on the “Recovery for the future of Europe” with contributions from the presidents of all main EU institutions, who reflected on the role that civil society can play to face the challenges Europe and the whole world are facing.

Christa Schweng, the newly elected President of the EESC started her speech by saying that the EESC *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. This role, according to Ms Schweng, is not only positive, but even necessary: 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.*

The new President of the EESC took the opportunity of the debate to present the main priorities of her term of office, including the 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.* With this aim, Ms Schweng announced that Committee's Code of Conduct for Members and the Rules of Procedure will be reinforced.

With a more general perspective, Christa Schweng also highlighted the need to tackle the economic and social hardship caused by COVID-19: *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.* Ms Schweng presented her vision for post-COVID 19 Europe, *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.*

Christa Schweng concluded her speech by recalling that the motto of her presidency, "United for the future of Europe", cannot be discussed without talking about the Conference on the Future of Europe. This conference, said Ms Schweng, will be a *unique opportunity* for European Union society. *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,* she concluded.

The newly appointed EESC Vice-Presidents also took part in the debate. **Giulia Barbucci**, Vice-President responsible for the Budget, recalled that *the EU has done a great job to tackle the current crisis, but what is still missing is the centrality of people, and the EESC can play a very important role on this. We must convince citizens that the EU is a positive project to contain the economic and social costs of this crisis.* **Cillian Lohan**, Vice-President for Communication stressed that *members of the EESC have a unique perspective of the impact of the EU on the day to day lives of different sectors of society; and in my time as a member I have seen that we can have an impact with our work. We build consensus, and this is the power that brings weight to our work,* concluded Mr. Lohan.

Institutional support

The president of the European Parliament, **David Maria Sassoli**, expressed his gratitude for the support given by the EESC to different initiatives aimed to help people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. *This crisis can be an opportunity to put Europe in the right track, to build a fairer and more sustainable society, and I'm sure the EESC will continue to represent the interests of our citizens.*

Charles Michel, President of the European Council, sent a video message to emphasize that *the EESC plays a key role in connecting the hopes and expectations of European citizens with EU leaders,* as it represents the voice of the strong and dynamic European civil society.

The president of the European Commission, **Ursula von der Leyen**, also participated in the debate with a video message in which she stressed the important role the EESC has to play in *supporting and delivering a green, digital and resilient recovery. You are in the frontline to measure the impact of this pandemic; the European Commission needs your advice and your experience*, said Ms. Von der Leyen.

Apostolos Tzitzikostas, President of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) expressed his concern about the lack of resources available for local and regional administrations across Europe and recalled that *the EESC and the CoR are bridges between citizens and institutions and both promote a participatory democracy*.

The voice of the groups

The presidents of the three groups represented at the EESC also contributed to the debate.

Stefano Mallia, President of the Employers' Group, stressed the role of economic actors: *We are convinced that businesses that manage to face the challenges ahead and succeed will be key to the recovery of the EU economy as a whole. Therefore, the EESC Employers' Group calls for a Europe that strengthens the competitiveness of European enterprises, encourages entrepreneurship and provides favourable conditions for innovating, investing, operating and ultimately creating jobs*.

The President of the Workers' Group, **Oliver Röpke**, said that *in difficult times, people need support, a voice to guide them, and I'm convinced that the EESC can be this voice, urging for solidarity as the guiding principle of any recovery strategy*. But he also suggested that *the EESC must adapt to the times, working more closely with other institutions and civil society organisations to maximize its impact*.

Seamus Boland, President of the Diversity Europe Group outlined that *only with the support of civil society will we make the most of the opportunities offered by the European Union. I call on all of us to apply our imagination and our humanity to improving the lives of our fellow citizens. To render possible, what may at first might appear impossible. That is the role of civil society!*