

EESC calls on Austria's EU presidency to use its power as bridge builder to reinforce Europe's unity

Migration was one of the main topics during the discussion with the Austrian EU-presidency. While members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomed the title "A Europe that protects" they called on the presidency to put European values at centre stage and be a real bridge builder between all EU Member States.

"The EU can crash over the migration issue, over Schengen, over upholding fundamental values. More than *A Europe that Protects*, we should stand for a Europe that protects, promotes and shares. That's the Europe of Schuman, that's the Europe for the future," President Luca Jahier said during the plenary, urging the Austrian presidency to be the 'honest broker' it wants to be by finding adequate, common, shared and long-term solutions. "The EESC will be both critical and supportive," he added.

Gernot Blümel, Austrian Minister for the EU, Arts, Culture and Media, presented Austria's EU programme at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 11 July. The Austrian EU presidency will work towards building "A Europe that protects", prioritising the following three topics

- Security and the fight against illegal migration
- Ensuring prosperity and competitiveness through digitalisation
- Stability in the European neighbourhood, offering a European perspective to the Western Balkans/South Eastern Europe.

Gabriele Bischoff, president of the Workers' Group, said that workers supported a different concept of a Europe that protects. "Particularly in times where trust in Europe is fading, citizens need to know that Europe can ensure their rights and freedoms", she said. As regards migration, Ms Bischoff said that European fundamental rights protected all people in Europe – Europeans and migrants. She echoed Austria's president, Alexander Van der Bellen: "If a Europe that protects means an EU that protects against climate change, poverty, wars and persecution and controls its external borders, then this motto is suitable." Other members of the Workers' Group emphasized that there are values, principles and fundamental rights which cannot be given up. We have to respect human rights and the fundamental values that guide Europe.

Arno Metzler, president of the Diversity Europe Group, hoped that the Austrian presidency would strike a balance between the protection of European citizens and Europe's fundamental rights. "I hope that Austria's presidency will defend humanitarian issues and humanity and ensure that we work together. We also should work together in creating a common shared European identity. Migration is only one aspect, but there are many other issues, such as digital trade, free trade, citizen participation or the MFF where we need

to work together. We will be your partner speaking on behalf of civil society. Let us use our European values to provide new impetus to create a common European identity for all Europeans, in the North, South, East and West “, said Mr Metzler.

Jacek Krawczyk, president of the Employers’ Group, underlined that Europe is not only a Single Market, but it is also about its values, which are non-negotiable. He said: “Europe is still at a crossroads. We need to be clear on the direction we want to take. The Employers’ Group agrees that the EU should focus on big issues that require a joint solution. Maintaining the Schengen area is a must for that. Undermining the Schengen would have devastating consequences for business and for all citizens”.

In his reply, the minister responded to several questions and comments regarding migration and vigorously defended the planned migration centres outside Europe as the only reasonable solution to stop deaths in the Mediterranean. “As long as it remains possible to get on a boat which could be a ticket to Europe, the dying in the Mediterranean won’t stop”, the minister said.

As regards digitalisation and innovation, the Minister stressed that Europe should not copy the old model of “Silicon valley”, but create a new one with the next cutting edge innovation, like block chain technology.