

# EESC discusses migration and education with Commissioner for Promoting European Way of Life

We are awaiting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum with great hope but also concern, the EESC tells Commissioner Schinas.

At its July plenary session, the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** hosted a debate with Commission Vice-President, **Margaritis Schinas**, who presented several upcoming initiatives falling under his portfolio of "Promoting our European Way of Life", including the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Skills Agenda, the EU for Health Programme and the new Security Union Strategy.

In his welcoming remarks to **Commissioner Schinas**, the **EESC president, Luca Jahier**, said: *The values of solidarity, equality and fairness, which your portfolio is based on, are the three elements at the very core of the EESC's endeavours. In its opinions, the EESC has already dealt with some of the topics covered by these long-awaited initiatives, and we will continue do to so.*

## **The New Pact on Migration and Asylum**

Migration policy and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum almost monopolised the EESC debate.

**Mr Jahier** said it is in the field of migration and integration that the values of solidarity, equality and fairness, or the lack of them, were especially visible.

*The situation can no longer continue where Member States in Southern Europe, particularly Greece, but also Cyprus, Malta, Italy, Bulgaria and Romania, have to carry a disproportionate burden while some countries opt out from their obligations, refusing to show solidarity. I therefore await the New Pact on Migration and Asylum with great hope but also concern, and I hope that it will lead to substantial reform of the Dublin system, which has been a black hole in EU policy for all too long,* said **Mr Jahier**.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, announced as the number one priority of the Von der Leyen Commission and of which there are great expectations, had to be delayed due to the pandemic. It has now been postponed until after the negotiations on the strengthened EU long-term budget, taking place on 17 and 18 July.

**Mr Schinas** told the plenary that the Commission was now almost ready to present the New Pact, which will provide a holistic solution, as the current situation, where Europe does not have a proper single migration policy, cannot continue.

*We only have a patchwork of regulatory solutions that provide unequal outcomes and some outdated legislation, and we have some money that we try to channel as best as we can. The fact that Europe does not have a single migration policy fit for the time we live in is not to its credit*, he said.

The fundamental premise of the Pact will be that Europe continues to be an asylum destination for those who flee persecution, dictatorship and look to protect their lives.

*But I also want to be very clear: those who are not under the protection of the EU and national asylum laws will simply have to go back – they will have to be returned. This is an important part of the equation: otherwise, we will not be able to construct a holistic EU asylum and migration policy*, **Mr Schinas** said.

The new policy should have a strong external dimension in order to regulate the EU's relations with countries of origin and with immediate neighbours like Turkey and Libya. The EU would help those countries create more opportunities for their young citizens to stay so that they are less tempted to emigrate.

More robust management of external borders, with a reinforced European Border and Coast Guard Agency that includes a standing corps of 10 000 border guards, was also envisaged by the Pact, as was shared management of asylum applications, which would split the burden equally between all Member States, ensuring solidarity and lifting the pressure off the first-entry countries.

**Mr Schinas** said he hoped the Pact will be supported by all the Member States.

In the exchange of views with the Commissioner, EESC members pointed to the importance of full social and economic inclusion of migrants and to the need to emphasise their contribution to our societies and economies, which is key for changing the migration narrative and for fighting discrimination and racism.

*The issue of migration is not only about borders: it is also a question of mind-set, of addressing the 'borders of the mind' which divide "us" from "them" and prevent learning and reconciliation. We have to change the mentality which sees migrants only as criminals, fuelling hatred*, said the EESC president.

## **EU Health Programme**

**Mr Schinas** announced a powerful EU Health Programme that dedicates 23 times more funding to health than the previous MFF. A "preparedness plan", which plans ahead for the second wave of COVID-19 infections, is also in the pipeline, as is a comprehensive vaccine coverage programme which will ensure that once the COVID-19 vaccine has been developed it is available to all Europeans.

## **EU Security Union Strategy**

The new strategy, which aligns physical and digital protection, will be presented on 22 July. It will make sure that Europeans enjoy equal protection

from digital and physical threats

## **The Skills Agenda**

The recent pandemic further accentuated the need for investment in inclusive education and training. Upskilling and reskilling should be a top priority, especially for those workers whose jobs become obsolete as a result of technological and environmental challenges.

*Europe needs a skills revolution. We need to make sure that skills in Europe are not a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise. This skills revolution must leave no-one behind,* said the Commissioner, stressing that the EU will need 250 000 digital workers in the coming years.

## **Education**

The Commissioner announced a major flagship objective of creating the European education area by 2025, with greater mobility for teachers and students and a considerable increase in resources for the Erasmus+ programme.

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