

# The priorities of Croatia's EU presidency command our support



**EESC is ready to give a helping hand to Croatian endeavours to strengthen the Union and promote a credible and merit-based EU enlargement policy.**

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** has expressed its agreement with the priorities of the new Croatian presidency of the Council of the EU and has said they strongly resonate with the Committee's own agenda to promote a robust and prosperous Europe based on common values.

The priorities of Croatia's EU presidency, the first since it joined the Union in 2013, were presented to the EESC by the country's Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, **Gordan Grlić Radman** at the EESC plenary session on 22 January.

Extending a warm welcome to the Croatian Foreign Minister, the EESC president **Luca Jahier** said: *The priorities that the Croatian presidency intends to move forward during its term coincide with those promoted by the EESC, particularly where they relate to sustainability.*

*We welcome Croatia's emphasis on **a Europe that develops** by ensuring better conditions and prospects for all European citizens, through balanced and sustainable growth. We are convinced that the sustainable development agenda*

*must be the EU's top priority for the next decade, because it perfectly balances economic prosperity, environmental issues and social inclusiveness, Mr Jahier maintained.*

As presented by Minister **Grlić Radman**, Croatia chose "A strong Europe in the world of challenges" as the motto of its presidency to reflect the vision of an EU that acts for the benefit of all its Member States and citizens. Croatia's policy towards the EU in the next six months would rest on four pillars: **a Europe that develops, a Europe that protects, a Europe that connects and an influential Europe.**

*We can only subscribe to these priorities, Mr Jahier said, adding that the Croatian debut on the European stage came at a significant time for the future of the EU, coinciding with the beginning of the EU's new institutional cycle and the very final stage of Brexit. Europe is faced with many other pressing troubles such as the adverse effects of climate change, populism or the widening of economic and social inequalities between Member States, threatening to shake the very foundations of the European project.*

*Hardly any other country has taken over the presidency, faced with so many challenges. I can assure you that the EESC is eager to contribute and support the work of the Croatian presidency, Mr Jahier declared.*

**Mr Grlić Radman** said the Croatian presidency had requested input from the EESC in several areas *to guide its future reflection and action.* At Croatia's request, the EESC will therefore be drawing up exploratory opinions on:

- demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities;
- a single market for all;
- sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour;
- the effects of campaigns on participation in political decision making; and
- financing the transition to a low carbon economy and the challenges in financing climate change adaptation.

**Mr Grlić Radman** said he hoped that the topics raised jointly with the EESC would contribute to the reflections on the future of the European project, which will be explored at the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, where the Croatian presidency will have a special role in preparing its inter-institutional mandate. The conference is to be held in May in Croatia under the guidance of the Commission's new Vice-President for Demography and Democracy, Croatia's Dubravka Šuica.

**Mr Grlić Radman** announced Croatia would continue to give backing to all the Western Balkan countries on their European path, based on their achievements in fulfilling the conditions and necessary criteria. To that end, Croatia will host the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May.

*We will continue to support a credible and merit-based EU enlargement policy. If the EU wants to be powerful, it must show its strength by encouraging*

*these countries to implement democratic reforms and improve the efficiency of their institutions and media freedoms, Mr Grlić Radman said.*

Recalling the EESC's resolution from last October, in which it described the decision taken by EU leaders to further postpone opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania as a geostrategic and historic mistake, **Mr Jahier** said the EESC would be *more than happy to give key priority to the Western Balkans* and that it would back Croatia in its support of the enlargement policy.

In the ensuing debate, **Mr Grlić Radman** exchanged views with EESC members from all of its three Groups representing Europe's employers, workers and diverse civil society organisations respectively.

The EESC members said they believed the motto of the Croatian presidency was very fitting and said the presidency was Croatia's chance to show which road we should collectively take. They hoped the Croatian presidency would contribute to the debate on the European Pillar of Social Rights and its financing and would promote the development leading to cohesion, including the development of rural areas. Among other points, they also emphasised the importance of the single market and expected a response to the alarming brain drain from some EU countries.

The EESC announced it would hold several conferences in Croatia and in Brussels in relation to the presidency.

*You can count on us and on the support of the EESC, the House of European Civil Society, president Jahier said, concluding the debate.*

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## [Statement by Presidents Michel, Sassoli and von der Leyen on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau](#)

*"To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time." – Elie Wiesel, Night*

Seventy-five years ago, Allied Forces liberated the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. They ended the most abhorrent crime in European history, the planned annihilation of the Jews in Europe. Six million Jewish children, women and men were murdered as well as millions of innocent people among them hundreds of thousands of Roma, persecuted due to their ethnicity. The price was unspeakably high, but there could hardly be a more symbolic and greater triumph over the Nazis than to commemorate this victory in Israel.

Revisionism and lack of education are threatening the common understanding of the uniqueness of the Shoah that is necessary to translate “Never Again” into concrete action now. By joining today’s meeting of Heads of State and Government in Jerusalem, we add our voices to those who are determined to not let extremists and populists go unchallenged when they are trying to cross boundaries and question – once again – human dignity and equality of all human beings.

The Holocaust was a European tragedy, it was a turning point in our history and its legacy is woven into the DNA of the European Union. Remembering the Shoah is not an end in itself. It is one cornerstone of European values. A Europe that places humanity at its centre, protected by the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights.

We are at a crossroads. As the number of survivors is dwindling, we will have to find new ways to remember, embracing the testimonies of the descendants of survivors. They remind us to be vigilant about the rising tide of antisemitism that is threatening the values we hold dear – pluralism, diversity, and the freedoms of religion and expression. Values that cherish minorities: all minorities, and always. Jewish communities have contributed to shaping the European identity and will always be part of it. All parts of our society, new and old, must embrace these lessons from the Shoah.

We have a duty to stand shoulder to shoulder with Jewish communities as they feel again threatened across Europe – most recently in Halle, Germany. All EU Member States stand united in the determination that any form of racism, antisemitism and hatred have no place in Europe and we will do whatever it takes to counter them. State authorities, as well as actors from across all sectors of civil society should unite to reaffirm Europe’s unfaltering vigilance whenever and wherever democratic values are threatened.

We cannot change history, but the lessons of history can change us.

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## **EIB strengthens support for priority investment across Greece**



- **EUR 18.6 billion climate action, business and infrastructure investment backed by EIB**
- **EIB financing national contribution to high-impact European Union investment across Greece**
- **EUR 150 million new EIB loan part of EUR 1.7 billion support since 2014**

The European Investment Bank today agreed to continue support for new priority investment across Greece intended to enhance energy efficiency and tackle climate change, improve small business competitiveness, accelerate research and innovation, and support health, education, culture and urban regeneration initiatives across Greece. The EUR 18.6 billion investment programme under the Partnership Agreement 2014-2020 has been successfully supporting small and medium sized priority schemes across Greece since 2014 and ensuring that high-impact projects essential for sustainable development and economic recovery are not delayed.

The latest European Investment Bank loan for priority investment in Greece was signed at the Ministry of Finance in Athens by Andrew McDowell, European Investment Bank Vice President, Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance and Governor of the European Investment Bank and Yannis Tsakiris, Deputy Minister of Development and Investments. Adonis Georgiadis, Minister of Development and Investments, and Kostas Karamanlis, Minister of Infrastructure and Transport were also present.

“The European Investment Bank (EIB) today agreed to continue to support new priority investments in Greece, aimed at increasing energy efficiency and tackling climate change, enhancing the competitiveness of small businesses, accelerating research and innovation and supporting initiatives in the fields of health, education, culture and urban development. These investments are needed to reinforce the country’s competitiveness, support businesses so they can create jobs and grow, and to secure Greece’s position in attracting foreign investments. The new support, agreed upon today with the European

Investment Bank, is the continuation of successful investments in projects that transform the country and demonstrate the EIB's willingness to support Greece in the long-run.

Without the excellent cooperation between Greece and the EIB, the implementation of the € 18.6 billion investment program would not have been possible and many projects in the country would not have access to the European Structural and Investment Funds." said Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance of the Hellenic Republic and Governor of the European Investment Bank.

"The EIB's support for the national contribution to the NSRF programme already started the previous 2008-2014 programming period, specifically in 2010. We are continuing this cooperation in the current programming period, which shows the trust of EIB in the growth potential of the country. The Ministry of Development and Investments as coordinator in the area of development, investments and financing, will play an even more important role towards this direction." Yannis Tsakiris, Deputy Minister of Development and Investments.

"The European Investment Bank is pleased to support the nationwide programme with today's signature of a new EUR 150 million loan that will unlock new funding for the latest group of projects, almost one-fifth of which are climate related," said Andrew McDowell, European Investment Bank Vice President responsible for lending operations in Greece.

The EUR 150 million loan agreement signed today represents the latest EIB support for the Greek Partnership Agreement. The EIB is providing a total of EUR 1.7 billion for the Greek national contribution to the investment initiative that will be used alongside European Structural and Investment Funds.

### **Strengthening climate action in Greece**

The investment programme is expected to enable new smart energy, energy efficiency, and renewable energy projects across Greece and improve water and waste management. The initiative is expected enable significant support for climate action by reducing carbon emissions and helping projects adapt to a changing and more extreme climate.

### **Improving education, health and urban regeneration**

In recent years the investment programme has supported small scale investment in schools, hospitals and health centres across Greece as well as backing regeneration and economic development in communities across Greece.

### **Helping companies to expand and develop business skills**

The new EIB loan agreed today will enable the investment programme to expand support for SMEs across Greece, including helping companies to develop new markets and improve competitiveness. The scheme is also helping to improve skills and capacity building in businesses

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## The EESC bids farewell to its British members with the promise of maintaining close ties with UK civil society



**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) paid tribute to its British members on 22 January 2020 at the last plenary session they will attend before the UK leaves the EU on 31 January. The 24 members representing the United Kingdom received a commemorative medal in a ceremony that showed the EESC's commitment to maintaining strong ties with British civil society after Brexit.**

On 31 January 2020, the United Kingdom will officially leave the European Union after 47 years of membership, meaning that its representatives will no longer be present in the EU institutions. The EESC officially said goodbye to its British members, who will already be absent at the February plenary session, in a touching ceremony where many personal feelings surfaced.

**Luca Jahier**, president of the EESC, admitted that the choice made by British

citizens to leave the EU was a *decision of historical importance that we deeply regret, but that we have to accept and respect*. Mr Jahier spoke of the crucial contribution made by British members to the work of the EESC in many fields and said that *the UK's departure will force us to rethink the way in which we communicate with our citizens, so that they can relate in their everyday life to Europe's tangible and verifiable achievements*.

Nevertheless, the president of the EESC insisted on the EESC's determination to maintain close contacts with British civil society after Brexit: *There is no other alternative than a strong relationship between the EU and the UK, and we at the EESC will do whatever it takes to keep that strong link alive. Ceci n'est qu'un au revoir, mes amis*.

**Tom Jenkins**, president of the EESC between 1996 and 1998, was invited to the ceremony and expressed his sorrow for being about to lose his EU citizenship. He also claimed for the establishment of an Economic and Social Committee in the UK and asked British parties *to encourage dialogue with civil society representatives*.

The pro-European activist **Madeleinea Key**, also known as "EU Supergirl", also took part in the ceremony representing the "remainers", the British citizens who voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union in the 2016 referendum. She criticized the mix of apathy and ignorance that have fuelled the rise nationalism in the UK and warned EU leaders about the need to change the way they communicate to citizens. Kay announced that she will continue to fight for Europe in the UK and concluded: *We must believe that the future is Europe, so all British citizens know they will be forever Europeans*.

### **The voice of the groups and the way forward**

Three British members representing each of the three groups of the EESC took the floor to express their personal feelings and views on Brexit. **David Sears** (Employers Group) recalled his first visit to Brussels in 1958 and insisted on the need to involve and listen to young people and *to bring the whole of civil society into the social decision-making process*.

**Judy McKnight** (Workers Group) mentioned the need for an equivalent of the EESC at the UK level. She also reiterated that *when we cease to be members of the EU, we will not cease to be Europeans, we will not cease to care about European civil society, and we will not cease to play our part in resisting all policies that seek to diminish the rights and well-being of EU and UK citizens*.

Representing the Diversity Europe Group, **Jane Morrice** expressed her concern about the consequences of Brexit in Northern Ireland and outlined that *this will not be a divorce, just a separation agreement giving us time before we get back together*.

**Rose D'Sa**, also member of the Diversity Europe Group, spoke as the longest UK serving member to ask the EU to examine its own conscience, as in her opinion the Lisbon Treaty must be revised. *In the meantime the EU has lost the UK, which is a catastrophe. Was it worth?*, she asked.



The presidents of the three groups also contributed to the debate by acknowledging the work of the British members. **Jacek Krawczyk**, president of the Employers Group, stressed the need to *find the way to work on a future that will connect us as business people and as friends*. For the Workers Group, **Oliver Röpke** insisted on the need to keep strong ties with British civil society: *We must protect the economic, social and political ties developed over half a century of UK membership of the EU. The links between civil society in the UK and the rest of the EU will remain strong*. **Arno Metzler**, president of the Diversity Europe Group, expressed his gratitude for the work done by British members.

**Stefano Mallia**, president of the EESC's Brexit Follow-up Group, closed the debate referring to the dangers of Brexit in places like Scotland or Northern Ireland and mentioned communication as *the best tool to fight apathy and ignorance*. He also insisted on the need of setting up some kind of forum to keep alive the dialogue with British civil society: *We must fight to keep our friendship and I will do my best to build a structure that allows it*.

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## [Greece: EUR 180m EIB backing for new Heraklion airport](#)



- Project replaces second busiest airport in Greece and double passenger capacity for Crete
- Overcoming restricted passenger numbers key for tourism growth on largest Greek island
- New airport to overcome congestion and delays, improve service levels and security
- Thousands of jobs to be created during construction and more once operational

The European Investment Bank has agreed to provide a EUR 180 million loan to support construction of the New Heraklion International Airport on the Greek island of Crete. The new airport will replace the current airport serving Heraklion. During the summer tourism season the existing airport is heavily congested and cannot handle additional passengers, at the required Optimum level of service with the most recent security standards.

This European Investment Bank loan in support for Greek aviation investment was formally agreed by Andrew McDowell, European Investment Bank Vice President, Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance and Governor of the European Investment Bank, and Kostas Karamanlis, Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, during a visit to Athens earlier today. The loan was signed in the presence of Adonis Georgiadis, Minister of Development & Investments, and Yannis Tsakiris, Deputy Minister of Development and Investments.

“Today marks a key milestone in the history of aviation in Greece that will unlock the full tourism potential of the beautiful island of Crete. I welcome the support of the European Investment Bank for the new Heraklion Airport that will create thousands of jobs during construction and when operational and ensure a warm welcome for millions of visitors to Greece in the years to come.” said Christos Staikouras, Minister of Finance of the Hellenic Republic and Governor of the European Investment Bank,

The Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, Kostas Karamanlis, said: “Today we are truly pleased that a major development project is underway; the new airport of Heraklion in the area of Kasteli. A very important project for the island of Crete, but also for our tourism as a whole. The European Investment Bank is our steady ally, not only today, but also in other key areas : flood prevention projects throughout the country and a road rehabilitation and safety project. Our cooperation is excellent and EIB’s contribution is invaluable.”

“The European Investment Bank recognises the importance of new investment to increase passenger capacity, improve security and support growth of the tourism sector in Greece. The EUR 180 million EIB loan will enable construction of the new Heraklion airport to finally start after many years of planning and delay. The EIB recognises the commitment to re-develop the existing Heraklion Airport area to unlock economic, environmental and social benefits. This redevelopment is an integral part of our loan conditions.” said Andrew McDowell, European Investment Bank Vice President responsible for lending operations in Greece.

The new airport will be built at Kasteli, 30km from Heraklion. The existing airport will be closed once the new airport is operational.

The 28 year EIB loan to the Hellenic Republic will finance the state contribution to the EUR 517 million project.

### **Transforming passenger capacity**

The existing Heraklion airport is the second busiest in Greece and the most important of three civil airports on Crete. Passenger numbers at the current

airport have grown since 2012 and now exceed 8.1 million passengers a year. This is well above the number expected when the airport was built and can be adequately handled today.

Once complete the new airport will increase operational capacity to ensure passenger comfort and improve services.

### **Improving links to the rest of Crete**

Construction of the new Heraklion airport is expected to take five years. The project will include a new 18km motorway and 6km access road.

### **Building on support for leading airports around the world**

In recent years the European Investment Bank has financed long-term airport investment in Frankfurt, Amsterdam, London, Madrid, Budapest, Helsinki, Zagreb and Beijing amongst other major airports. The EIB also backed construction of the new Athens airport and the upgrade of 14 regional airports across Greece