

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.*