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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

560TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE (JDE) –
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**Resolution of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘A New Narrative for Europe — The
EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe’**

(2021/C 286/01)

Rapporteurs: **Stefano MALLIA** (Group I)

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At its plenary session of 27 and 28 April 2021 (meeting of 27 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following resolution by 226 votes to 1 with 5 abstentions.

1.1. The Conference on the Future of Europe (‘the Conference’) gives a unique opportunity for Europe to reconnect and engage with European citizens, including through civil society actors, to provide them with a meaningful say on their common future. It is now time to bring to fruition the promise of Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU to give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action and to maintain open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.

1.2. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that the success of the Conference will also depend on the ability to outline a new narrative for Europe, grounded in the realities of everyday life, for which European citizens can claim ownership. Such a narrative shall be more than a list of achievements; it shall, instead, be a concrete rational and emotional link between the EU and its citizens. Strategic themes should be put in a common perspective to avoid a looming Europe à la carte. The objective is to rediscover and renew a much needed sense of community based on shared values, generating new European momentum to face current and future challenges.

1.3. The EESC has deep rooted links with all walks of life (employers, trade unions, civil society at large) in all the Member States; as such, it is best placed to effectively involve the organised civil society as it has the respective networks to do so. This is its undisputed know-how and *raison d’être*. EESC’s permanent participation throughout the whole Conference process including in the Executive Board is key.

1.4. The EESC must be fully enshrined in the governance of the Conference; it is determined to provide strong and clear proposals, based on its narrative and vision for the EU of the next decades. The Committee reiterates its firm belief that the Conference must provide proposals and solutions that will make a real tangible difference to the citizens of the EU. Therefore, it is vital that the Conference must make concrete and measurable progress and not just lead to non-binding

discussions with citizens that lead nowhere. As such, the proposal of Commission Vice President Šefčovič to include the conclusions of Conference in the work programme of the Commission in 2022 points to the right direction. This is a crucial point which underpins the credibility and ambition of this whole political process.

1.5. The governance of the Conference should define the scope and purpose of citizen and civil society engagement, which should be stated at the outset. Knowing the goal of participation instruments can also help to align the objectives with the available means, both in terms of process design and budget. The governance will certainly have to resort to different formats and methods of involvement, depending on the phase and level at any given point and find ways to reach those Europeans that are not self-motivated to engage. Citizen and civil society's contribution should be taken up by politicians and institutions or reflected in decisions, otherwise their trust in these exercises is likely to fade. Too high expectations must be avoided. A feedback mechanism will ensure that the ideas expressed during the Conference events result in concrete recommendations for EU action.

1.6. The short timeframe of the Conference imposes limitations on all participants. It should thus be understood as a starting point of a continuous process for greater engagement with Europe's citizens, building on this initial period. This opportunity should be used to change paradigm and the level of ambition across policy fields, including economic, social and environmental policy.

1.7. The deliberations of the Conference must be followed-up and approached with open-mindedness by all actors, with no foregone conclusions on next steps, with all options on the table. In this respect, some EU initiatives and instruments were launched in the last years, which now need to be implemented. Regular monitoring of the implementation should be promoted as well as an update on the progress made at EU level on the measures adopted and instruments available.

2. A New Narrative for Europe — Europe: a great place to be and prosper

2.1. Against this background, the EESC proposes a new narrative for Europe that ties Europe's distant and recent past to the present, and provides a vision for the future built on cooperation across borders, strengthening the links between the people of Europe, and rooted in values of solidarity, social justice, inter-generational cooperation, gender equality, sustainable prosperity, and just green and digital transitions. It is imperative to leverage public support for these values, in order to re-think our growth and governance models towards sustainability, build a more equal society and place civil society organisations at the centre of this reconstruction and recovery.

The Europe our citizens need is one that:

- Recognises that civil society are guardians of the common good and integral to identifying solutions to Europe's common challenges;
- Focuses on a fair and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crises that paves the way to a more inclusive society and builds long-term competitiveness, taking full account of the intertwined social, economic, democratic, demographic and climate crises in EU Member States, the necessity for green and digital transitions, as well as the longer term structural changes being triggered by the pandemic. Europe's economy must be fully supported to recover the lost ground, taking into account the need for upward convergence, greater cohesion, social protection, reinforced investments in public services, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and poverty reduction;
- Supports economic and social recovery, entrepreneurship, just transition, quality job creation, education and skills acquisition, innovation, infrastructural and social investment, decarbonisation, digitalisation, completion of single market, and economic and monetary integration;
- Protects all of its citizens, including the most marginalised, safeguarding their health and safety and well-being, the environment and biodiversity;
- Respects and promotes diversity, gender equality, fundamental rights, democracy, social dialogue, and inclusive governance; and

- Promotes peace, security and progress in the world through multilateralism, promotion of democracy and rule of law, human rights, social dialogue, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), diplomacy and open, fair and sustainable trade.

2.2. The EESC is unanimous in recognising that the double transition, green and digital, are of paramount importance to strengthen Europe's sustainable competitiveness, solidarity and resilience to deal with future crises. The pandemic of COVID-19 has been the harshest crisis that the EU has faced since its creation. The pandemic has exacerbated the need for the EU to be able to provide for strong and consistent answers to improve the political, health, economic and social dimensions of the EU. This Conference provides the EU with a unique opportunity to achieve this result.

The need for a common European approach has been highlighted by the impact of COVID-19 on our citizens, societies and economies. The pandemic has shown that there is a strong rationale to act together, but it has also exposed weaknesses in how Europe deals with such fundamental challenges. In an age of 'permacrisis', the EU will need to strengthen its capacity to deal with crisis to deliver the outcomes European citizens want and deserve.

2.3. This crisis has also made clear that the EU should dedicate bigger efforts to ensuring that businesses, workers, as well as people facing poverty and social exclusion, are duly protected from the impact of recent and upcoming challenges. COVID-19 also made clear that sustainable competitiveness has to be supported and that investments in quality health, care, education and social services have to be increased across the EU. It will be crucial to further enhance health coordination at EU level, better tackle cross-border health threats and strengthen EU health systems.

2.4. The EU can count on key strengths, such as its internal market which is one of the biggest markets in the world, a set of fundamental non-negotiable values⁽¹⁾ which are an integral part of European society and democracy, and on solidarity as demonstrated by an ambitious Resilience and Recovery Facility, which requires the efficient implementation of national recovery plans. The ultimate goal of the EU must be to strengthen our social market economic model, where a sustainable, competitive economy and well developed social policies go hand in hand. Following from this, achieving the European Green Deal — that the EESC has welcomed since its very beginning — is the way forward. The Green Deal is the new European growth strategy, with prosperity, sustainability and social justice at its heart. Delivering a just transition to a climate neutral way of life, fostering quality jobs and promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation, including the circular economy and social economy, will be key for a prospering Europe.

2.5. The EU is however facing strong challenges: the pandemic will create more and not less inequalities both among and inside the Member States. This is why the two sides of the coin must be pursued: the sustainable competitiveness of the European economy and businesses of all sizes, in particular SMEs, must be further strengthened. At the same time Europe should embrace a more ambitious and concrete social dimension that leaves no one behind.

2.6. To protect its values and to deliver on its priorities, the EU must also play a positive role in the international economic sphere. In a world characterised by strong competition and friction, not only at the economic but also at the political level, the EU must become a global actor that can defend its interests and values more effectively. Achieving a degree of open strategic autonomy, to maintain the capacity of the EU to act in crucial economic areas, must be balanced by a willingness to cooperate to advance solutions to common challenges such as climate change and to strengthen the rules-based multilateral system.

2.7. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of a strong and resilient European industrial basis. Europe must have an ambitious industrial policy that drives the twin transitions — digitalisation and sustainability — while enhancing Europe's global competitiveness. A new industrial policy, using a range of different policies (including trade, skills, investment, research and energy) needs to constantly anticipate the key future economic sectors and drivers, creating the framework conditions, including the necessary skills profiles, to enable European industry to remain at the forefront of global technology and innovation, delivering high quality jobs and sustainable growth for Europe. Achieving competitiveness, sustainability and social justice at the same time will safeguard Europe's socioeconomic model for the future.

⁽¹⁾ Art. 2 of TEU.

2.8. It is critical that the EU uses this opportunity to modernize and transform its industrial sectors and their supply chains, so that they remain competitive in a world of lower emissions. Addressing the challenges associated with long-term transformations requires anticipation of change and active transition management on the part of policy-makers, the social partners, civil society organisations and key stakeholders in these countries and regions. Social dialogue, information, consultation and participation of workers and their representative organisations play a key role in managing transitions in a forward-looking way. This will absolutely be crucial for Europe, since only by placing both companies and workers at the very heart of the recovery and future policies, Europe can succeed. Competitiveness and inclusiveness have to go hand in hand: the best performing Member States, from an economic point of view, are those which have the highest social standards, not vice versa.

3. Role of the EESC

3.1. Strengthening the EESC's own role calls for proving its relevance and added value as a consultative body, based on its unique role of bridging the gap (1) between policymakers and civil society, (2) between different actors of civil society, (3) and between actors at both national and European levels. In particular, to create a transnational debate that connects the European debates at the Member State level with each other.

3.2. The EESC's position should be the result of a true discussion, starting from the input of civil society actors and developed from the bottom up. This approach is the only one that ensures that all points of view are considered and that brings clear and efficient results.

3.3. To establish cooperation with the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and organise Going Local missions together in full respect of the different but complementary remits of the two institutions.

3.4. The EESC is invited to act, via its members in the Conference plenary and via its observers in the Executive Board, as an institutional intermediary between the Conference and national organisations representing civil society.

3.5. The EESC has an ad-hoc group. The ad-hoc group decided on roadmap with the following aims:

- Improving the ways of engaging and connecting with civil society actors, particularly interacting and activating EESC Members' constituencies on the ground;
- Upgrading and strengthening the EESC's own role and influence;
- Providing structured civil society input to EU policymaking by making relevant proposals to the Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission on how to improve the functioning of the EU and the work of the EESC into the legislative process.

3.6. Report back on the debates and dialogues in the Members States and within the Conference to the EESC plenary with the participation of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), CoR members, Commissioners and Council ministers.

4. Conclusions

The future we want: civil society in the driving seat

4.1. The EESC believes in the need for a strong, shared narrative for the European Union.

In that sense, Europe has to be considered as: 1) guardian of shared fundamental values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, 2) global promoter of sustainability, open and fair trade and multilateralism, 3) haven for a unique economic and social model based on fair competition and solidarity in an area without internal borders and 4) driver of a sustainable prosperity; with a strong European civil society at its heart.

4.2. The Conference on the Future of Europe should be the vehicle through which we can bring about long-lasting change in the EU, including an increased and more meaningful involvement of citizens and of organised civil society in the European public sphere. As a first step in this process, civil society must work in partnership, closely collaborating, networking, exchanging good practices and seeking consensus.

4.3. Civil society organisations are crucial in identifying solutions to today's challenges. The EESC asks that the EU and national authorities recognise the crucial role of organised civil society, in building trust, shaping public opinions and as positive agents of change. It is also imperative that the EU supports the pivotal role played by civil society organisations in promoting and defending European values, democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, against increasing illiberalism, populism and 'shrinking civic space'.

4.4. Key to the EU's renewal and socioeconomic reconstruction, will be ensuring that all parts of society are effectively involved in the co-design, co-participation, co-implementation and co-assessment of EU policies, notably the National Recovery and Resilience Plans as well as future National Reform Programmes, using existing consultation structures, such as the European Semester process, and explicitly recognising civil society as critical implementing partners and beneficiaries.

4.5. Imagining and building these resilient, equal and sustainable societies will require bottom-up initiatives, which embrace new definitions of well-being and development beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP), whilst respecting the opinions and rights of citizens. Moreover, it is imperative that limitations to rights introduced during the pandemic are not continued post COVID-19.

4.6. Finally, for the EESC it is also crucial to constantly assess the suggested measures and policy actions. The EESC will offer a solid contribution to this process, through the experience and knowhow the Committee has of engaging in dialogue with citizens across the whole of society in all the EU Member States.

Brussels, 27 April 2021.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG
