



ESC Public Consultation on the Future of Europe

Athens, 4 November 2021

Royal Olympic Hotel, “Kallirroë Hall”

JOINT STATEMENT

The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the climate change impact, the rapid technological development as well as the digital transformation have highlighted the need for both imminent and future adjustments in several areas of the public sphere on both a European and a Member State level alike.

The consequences of the aforementioned challenges are evident across all European countries to a greater or lesser degree, being however, more distinct to the peripheral countries, which have only recently emerged from a ten-year economic crisis.

The pandemic, climate and refugee crises, have given to the European societies the opportunity to reinstate the values of solidarity and cooperation and to shape a joint strategy so as to deal with emergencies.

Initiating a dialogue on the Future of Europe can be considered as a recognition of the importance demonstrated by the voice of both the European citizens and social partners representing international and national social dialogue committees and civil society consultative bodies.

- The EESC's contribution on a joint European vision based on the pillars of the citizens' economic prosperity, sustainable environmental development and an open European society provides a common foundation so as to setup a dialogue and reciprocity between European and national institutions, taking account at the same time the active participation of social partners and civil society.
- The EESC is convinced that Europe needs a new narrative In order to create an emotional link between Brussels and the European citizens. We want our Europe to be a truly great place to be and prosper. A Europe that is:

- a guardian of shared fundamental values,
- a global promoter of sustainability, open and fair trade and multilateralism,
- a haven for a unique economic and social model based on fair competition and solidarity in an area without internal borders,
- a driver of sustainable prosperity.

Through an open dialogue, the EU will once again be able, to become a source of cooperation, solidarity, social responsibility, economic democracy, culture and peace for Europe and all neighbouring regions. Furthermore, issues faced by the civil society views, can serve as a guidance for government policies and decisions on a broad range of matters, such as social and employment policy, entrepreneurship and innovation, health and climate change, immigration etc. The Conference must build on a **transparent, bottom-up process and deliver concrete results**. In order to ensure transparency and accountability, an online **dashboard** should be developed, allowing citizens to know what is the follow up that is given to their requests by EU institutions, whether reform measures stem from the Conference on the Future of Europe, and what is the timeline to implement them. If no action is taken on some ideas, the reasons must be explained.

The Economic and Social Council of Greece has organized together with the EESC, in Athens on November 4th, 2021, an event in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The following points have been raised:

- The digital and green transition has been acknowledged as a key priority. Both the EU, as well as national governments, are asked to take all necessary measures in order to ensure that this transition would i) include all citizens and businesses, ii) create conditions for productive reconstruction, iii) ensure social cohesion, iv) offer new growth opportunities for by aiming on prevention measures using research and v) favour the development of cooperative schemes.
 - Energy poverty, digital illiteracy, high energy costs and the lack of adequate financial tools could jeopardize the smooth transition to this new era and must be effectively addressed.
- In the absence of a common and certain legal framework, new forms of employment could create labour market and relations imbalances, thus pinpointing the necessity of social dialogue and collective bargaining. Institutionally coordinated reforms are also required in this field, in order to prevent the insecurity of a two-speed labour market.

- Distinct crisis management mechanisms are required in cases of natural disasters and refugee crises. It is also necessary, that fiscal crisis management strategies such as the exclusion of European and national public investment from national budget deficit calculations- should be created so as to protect Member States in times of recession.
- Early actions are needed to be taken concerning the funding of environmental and epidemiological studies and programs which could address the effects of climate change on health. It is also crucial that the individual national health systems of the Member States are reinforced, exploiting available methods and technologies.
- Strategies to tackle economic and social inequalities have always been the EU's comparative advantage. We must ensure that the same opportunities for work, business initiatives, social protection and access to information and funding are available to vulnerable groups, women, large families, people with disabilities and younger generations. It is also crucial that the social dialogue will always be at the forefront both on a national and an international level concerning the implementation of equality policies. Social inclusion must remain a key strategic goal of the EU of the future.
- The goal of EU-wide convergence in social and economic terms should remain an EU priority, in order to maintain the unity and harmonious coexistence of the European Union member states.
- The migration of population towards developed countries and the EU has intensively increased during the last couple of years and may continue to do so, in the coming decades due to either search for security, work and better quality of life, or to inaccessibility in natural resources (water, dry soils, high temperatures). Countries that could geographically be treated as «gateways» must be supported by infrastructure funding measures and by distribution, allocation and solidarity policies, in order to withstand the significant burden of refugee flows and/or to integrate part of this population (depending on their carrying capacity).
- A strong EU within the global community context could provide a good basis for Member States and their neighbours to coexist in peace and collaboration in accordance with the requirements of international law, thus achieving economic progress, territorial cooperation and cohesion. In the same context, institutional initiatives for cooperation with third countries should be taken so as to reduce sources of tension and fulfil conditions for normal neighbourly relations.
 - Both the EU and Greece should seize the initiative and formulate a plan for the institutional reinforcement of neighbouring countries belonging to North Africa and the Middle East, as well as for the reinforcement of relations with the Western Balkans.

- EU foreign policy should not leave any space for tensions between neighbouring countries or questioning of their national sovereignty and geopolitical conditions, especially as regards to the Member States that lie in the borders of EU.
- The values of solidarity and cooperation must be preserved both in terms of their declaratory nature and in terms of their content. The EU must therefore be prepared by adopting robust measures and policies for a collective response to any subsequent crisis (economic, environmental or health crisis), in order to maintain peace and prosperity over the coming years.
- Effective judicial protection is a guarantee for every rule of law focusing on respect for human dignity, protection of human rights, social justice and prohibition of all types of discrimination.
- A wider participation of institutions, a broader economic democracy and the evaluation of economic and social indicators when planning and implementing policies (taking in account regional specificities), can make a significant contribution so as to avoid centrifugal tendencies within the EU.
- The health crisis has made clear that access to appropriate education, open and transparent dialogue and secure, universally accessible information in relation to scientific achievements, are citizens' weapons in their arsenal when fighting against false news and irrationality. The EU must therefore set up mechanisms to protect societies from widespread fake news that constitutes a threat to social cohesion and potentially to the health of the population.

Taking advantage of the experience gained by the previous crises management, Europe is today able to successfully pass through the stages of correct diagnosis of problems and implementation of appropriate policies. Thus, we are optimistic that through this process Europe will have every potential to revive and regain European citizens' trust, further enforcing its constitutional role.