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Keynote: Research and Innovation missions and benefits from continuous and meaningful Civil Society's involvement to tackle today's Societal Challenges

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to this event, it is a pleasure for me to be a part of this panel with my fellow speakers, discussing an issue that is as delicate as it is crucial.

I would like to start by stressing what a time of great uncertainty we are going through. Europeans are called to face many challenges, and energy has gained an even more central stage in the plans for the future of the Union.

First of all, we are all witnessing that energy has become a precious and expensive good. The energy supply crisis and the high increase in energy prices following the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation have pressured us into rethinking a number of key issues: the entire EU's energy system; accelerating the energy transition; and how to achieve independence from fossil fuels. This has put European citizens, workers and business in a dire situation.

This perfect storm has aggravated the position of the most vulnerable groups. Energy poverty, a silent phenomenon that has many impacts on European households, has been at the center of our concerns for years. It is now becoming a serious challenge.

Back in 2020, amidst the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 36 million people claimed to be unable to afford keeping their homes warm. Today, the current crisis is further pushing up the numbers. Thus, we need to make sure that energy supply is available at affordable prices, and to make it a priority in the framework of a fair and just transition.

It is with this in mind, that the EESC, with the support of the French Presidency of the Council, organized a conference on "Tackling energy poverty at the heart of the ecological and energy transition" back this April. The conference put the focus on how to tackle energy poverty in the perspective of a socially fair and just transition towards a climate-neutral Union by 2050. The conference saw the participation of civil society organization and representative of EU decision-makers, allowing for a crucial dialogue between the two levels.

Secondly, we all know that the energy transition indeed is not just a matter of technological innovation, but also calls for deep social and political changes. In order to achieve a fair and inclusive energy transition, EU citizens must be at the heart of this transformation.

I would like to highlight again the fundamental role of civil society in tackling today's challenges. In their role, voicing the perspective of the European organized civil society, the Members of the EESC have been called to consider the new Commission plans in reaction to the multiple crisis we are facing.

On REPowerEU the EESC has expressed its support to the Commission's objective of achieving independence from Russian gas. Nonetheless, it fully recognizes the extreme difficulty that this entails for the European economy and society. Several recommendations have been put forward, including: streamlining and accelerating permit-granting procedures for renewables, subject of the Commission recommendation of the 18th of May; exploring different energy technologies like bio methane and geothermal sources; and supporting the necessary fiscal or regulatory intervention to secure affordable prices. All this, without hampering the functioning of the internal energy market and jeopardising decarbonisation and energy efficiency efforts.

In the context of the new gas storage Regulation, the EESC has urged the Institutions to introduce a short-term investment instrument, which will improve EU's energy independence, because merely accelerating existing plans is not enough to guarantee Europe's energy security. Moreover, the EU should consider using gas storage facilities in bordering third countries, which will bring a value-added to providing security of supply, especially in Ukraine.

Finally, the EESC is already engaged in preparing its reaction to the latest REPowerEU package that came out in May.

And now I would like to concentrate on the EESC stand on the future of Nuclear Energy in Europe. Nonetheless, I must stress that our official position has not been adopted yet, therefore our Members are still discussing the different approaches.

First and foremost, I believe that the European Union has the duty to protect and empower the citizens through an effective energy policy, demonstrating that it is possible to achieve the energy transition and reach the climate objectives, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

It is without doubt that the current situation has reopened the debate around the potential of nuclear energy. Can nuclear energy contribute to an independent and resilient energy system, support the transition towards more sustainable sources as a key component of the fight against climate change, and ensure the stability of the energy prices?

At the beginning of the year, the Czech Presidency of the Council asked the EESC to produce an exploratory Opinion on the role of nuclear energy for the stability of the EU energy prices and energy supply. This was even before the war started. At that time, the EESC had already joined other voices in the EU stressing that the current energy price crisis would not hit European citizens and companies so hard if Europe was not so highly dependent on imports of fossil fuels. Unfortunately, our energy policy was not reactive enough.

The response of the EESC to this question from the Czech Presidency will not be a simple one, and the role of Russia in the current situation will certainly not make it easier either. Numerous interests and concerns are in place. Several events throughout our history have reinforced the concerns of citizens on the use of nuclear energy. Therefore, this debate needs to be treated with the utmost attention.

While it is for each EU country to choose whether to make use of nuclear power, the role of the Union is to develop strategies to support the independence of our energy system and the best outcomes for the wellbeing of the EU citizens.

What, if any, can be the role of nuclear energy in the transition towards a climate neutral EU by 2050? How does nuclear energy interact with the growing share of renewables in our countries? Can nuclear power substitute natural gas and other fossil fuel in the efforts to achieve Europe strategic autonomy? These are the questions that we are looking to answer.

We already know that, in the short term, nuclear energy will not have a great impact on our energy prices, which are mostly depending on the current gas price. Nonetheless, the presence of nuclear energy in a country's energy mix can be instrumental, at least temporarily, in minimizing the impact of fossil fuels prices on the cost of electricity. In the long term the low operational costs and independence from gas market price, can help reducing the volatility of electricity prices.

Moreover, nuclear power could have a fundamental role in our transition towards a zero emission system. I think we all know that the sustainability goals that the EU has set within the Green Deal First and the Fit for 55 package not even one year ago are quite ambitious. To be able to achieve the climate neutrality we strive for, a concrete plan is needed, and with that, transitional, low carbon, energy sources are necessary.

The current relations with Russia are putting a great part of European energy supply at risk, and the gravest short-term concerns focus on being able to meet the demand for the next winter. Nonetheless, we must remember that natural gas was also given a role in the medium-term transformation of our energy system. The use of natural gas was considered a transitional measure, in order to grant a gradual and smooth transition towards a zero-emission Europe. Now, this path is no longer viable.

Several studies have found that nuclear power can have a fundamental role in our path towards decarbonization. Thanks to its stability, it can complement the supply coming from renewable sources, prone to disruptions. The potential of this technology has also been recognized by the Commission with the latest Complementary Taxonomy Delegated Act, adopted on 9 March 2022, which includes specific nuclear energy undertakings in the list of economic activities covered by the EU sustainable finance taxonomy. But we are well aware of the many voices that oppose very important arguments against this technology, also within our institution.

In this framework of supply uncertainty and strategic restructuring, closing the existing capacity means needing more fossil fuels and therefore an even greater energy dependency for Europe.

After saying all of this, one objective rises above all to contain the negative impacts of the crisis we are living: the necessity to advance on strategic autonomy reducing energy dependence from third countries, including Russia, reducing energy consumption, fighting energy poverty and keeping the pace of the energy transition.

To reach this objective, let me underline that the Economic and Social Committee remains fully committed to support the achievement of the goal of becoming the first climate neutral continent, and to do so through its role as a voice of organized civil society. Because the dialogue between the citizens and the decision-makers is one of the crucial pillars of our Union.

Thank you for your attention.