



TEN/705

Energy: women as equal players in the 21st century

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Energy: women as equal players in the 21st century
(own-initiative opinion)

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

The EESC recommends that the Commission encourage all decision-making authorities to:

- 1.1 **create the conditions for access to energy for all, reduce energy poverty**, and gather qualitative and gender-specific data with appropriate indicators;
- 1.2 **strengthen** and enforce existing legislation on equality at both EU and national level;
- 1.3 **provide for a targeted policy on gender equality in energy professions because women's talents matter**;
- 1.4 **create a level playing-field for training in energy-related careers in the Member States and at European level – set up a European STEM College**;
 - 1.4.1 **encourage Member States to develop "little polytechnic schools" for young children to familiarise them with STEM subjects**;
- 1.5 **create a level playing-field on the labour market in the energy sector**:
 - 1.5.1 **present gender-specific data for all parts of the sector**, including renewable energy and energy poverty; consider the opportunities for women, but avoid the energy and digital transitions trammelling women's careers and salaries;
 - 1.5.2 **introduce binding measures regarding the transparency of salaries and remuneration** because this is a prerequisite for real equal pay across the board;
 - 1.5.3 **enforce equality** on company boards;
- 1.6 **develop social dialogue and collective agreements** throughout Europe on equality in companies in the energy sector;
- 1.7 **change the mindsets of women themselves by means of role models, and create a network of EU outreach teams**;
- 1.8 **change men's mindsets and management training approaches**.

2. **Introduction: The energy sector and women**

- 2.1 **Equality** is a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and a principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) makes it a horizontal clause, mainstreaming equality in all policies.

2.2 In 2020 – the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration¹ – the EU is aiming to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women by means of a new strategy. A number of documents have been drafted on this subject in recent times; the **EESC does not propose to duplicate or paraphrase** these, but it supports their conclusions, for example those of the study requested by the European Parliament's FEMM Committee on the role of women in the energy transition², of the Commission's very recent communication on its gender equality strategy 2020-2025³ (COM(2020) 152 final), and of the studies carried out by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)⁴.

2.3 **The Commission believes that** "in business, politics and society as a whole, we can only reach our full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity. Gender equality brings more jobs and higher productivity – a potential which needs to be realised as we embrace the green and digital transitions and face up to our demographic challenges".

All of the challenges facing the energy sector are mentioned in this quote: potential and productivity, employability and thus skills and work-life balance, gender equality, demographics, and the shock of the green and digital transitions.

2.4 **The rate of employment for women** in the EU is (or was, before the impact of the coronavirus crisis) higher today than ever before, yet many women are still experiencing barriers to joining and remaining in the labour market. The question "Where are the women?" is becoming a commonplace in all sectors of activity, which is a step forward in comparison to the old days when the question was a sarcastic "What, women?" This does not mean that the gender gap in the workplace has been bridged. Like many sectors with a certain technical dimension, energy has been slow in moving towards parity: in Europe it would seem that an average of only 22% of its employees are women. This is the case in Croatia, for example⁵. Data on renewable energy should also be broken down by gender.

2.5 **Energy is a huge segment of the economy:** it covers raw materials, finished products and services, including mining, production, sales, transport and distribution, diplomacy, and physical and geopolitical security, thus using coal, wood, oil, gas, nuclear energy, wind, the sun, water, etc. to ensure that citizens, consumers and businesses have access to electricity, heating and independent transport. One particular feature of this sector is that it is a key lever for other economic sectors. It needs all available talent.

2.6 **All aspects of the energy sector are very stereotyped in terms of gender**, with men in a dominant position, which leads to major career imbalances between men and women in both the

1 <https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about>

2 *Women, Gender Equality and the Energy Transition in the EU*, study requested by the FEMM committee (May 2019) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608867/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608867_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608867/IPOL_STU(2019)608867_EN.pdf)

3 [COM\(2020\) 152 final](#), 5.3.2020, *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*.

4 European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Vilnius, *Gender and energy*.

5 Croatian Bureau of Statistics, energy sector excluding oil industry. https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2019/09-02-01_12_2019.htm.

public and private energy sectors, with no widespread willingness to take action to "en-gender" the value chain as a whole⁶.

2.7 **The number of women in leadership positions** in the energy sector is very low. Back in 2012, an EIGE study showed that, across Germany, Spain and Sweden, 64% of the 295 businesses in the sector had no women at executive level. The situation was better in the renewable energy and oil sectors, and a little better in the Nordic countries, but throughout the EU women are absent from top positions in the technological areas of the energy sector. In 2019, gender inequalities remained a concern in the sector (a Gender Equality Index score of 51.9⁷), though EIGE notes that almost all Member States have made progress in recent years.

3. **General comments: the need to reduce the gulf**

3.1 In order to speed up the pace of change, it is important to take simultaneous action in a number of areas and to narrow the gaps, which are cumulative and interconnected.

3.2 **The energy access gap**

3.2.1 It is clear that the transformation of the energy system is not just a purely technical issue but also a profoundly social one. In this regard, particular attention needs to be paid to ensuring access to energy for all. There are still households in the European Union that have difficulty accessing energy⁸, either because of their ability to connect to the networks or due to poverty. The women responsible for managing these households are the first to suffer, often having to make a difficult choice for themselves and their children between putting food on the table or heating their home ("heat or eat"). Energy policies do not take into account problems related to the division of responsibilities in households, which is why energy poverty should be considered from the point of view of gender (see the EESC opinion (TEN/707) on *Universal access to housing that is decent, sustainable and affordable over the long term*, rapporteur: Raymond Hencks, July 2020). Lack of access to energy also means they cannot access digital technologies, which makes their life much more complicated and isolates them in relation to society, work, education and culture. Lack of access to energy thus goes hand in hand with the digital divide, which is often compounded by the age gap. It is important to acknowledge all of these aspects and to take specific account of the gender most disadvantaged by them.

3.2.2 Gathering data on household energy use would provide a more accurate picture of the reality of households' poverty, which will have to be tackled through a comprehensive approach. In addition to a social tariff for energy, remedies for energy poverty are sought in urban policy, housing policy, access to work, wage levels, and the sales practices of businesses selling to end users. According to OECD studies, sustainable development is an issue of concern to women as consumers. Because of their responsibilities in the home and their roles as educators, and as

⁶ UN SDGs 5, 7 and 8; Joy Clancy, University of Twente, *Give women a chance: engendering the energy supply chain*.

⁷ EIGE, Gender Equality Index.

⁸ [OJ C 341, 21.11.2013, p. 21](#)

they are the ones that raise awareness of the sensible use of energy and recycling, they have a key role to play in changing behaviour patterns⁹.

3.3 The policy gap

3.3.1 **European energy policy** is based on five closely interlinked dimensions:

- security of supply;
- a fully integrated market;
- energy efficiency to reduce demand;
- decarbonisation of the economy;
- research and innovation for competitiveness.

To succeed, the Commission aims to:

- anticipate change by securing transitions;
- promote mobility;
- increase job creation;
- improve data quality;
- improve skills.

3.3.2 The **position of women** is never considered as an issue in itself, even though women are in a weak position in the energy sector and are always first in line for redundancies during crises, regardless of the nature of the crisis. The policy gap cannot be closed without taking specific measures in their favour in all policy areas – especially given that this is part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals¹⁰.

3.3.3 The EESC stresses that policies developed in the energy sector are compromised from their inception by a failure to take account of the gender dimension. The Committee calls for the Define, Plan, Act, Check **methodology** set out in the EIGE's publication *Gender and Energy*¹¹ to be disseminated widely in the form of a recommendation to Member State governments and to management training schools and businesses in the energy sector.

3.3.4 Like the EIGE, the EESC feels that the gender dimension can be integrated in **all phases of the energy policy cycle**. After analysing the situations, consulting stakeholders and analysing budgets, the implementation phases should start by raising awareness levels and boosting capacities and thus skills; the "gender toolkit", a training module on energy funded by FP7, demonstrates the relevance of gender within the energy sector and how energy research can

⁹ See EESC information report "Evaluating the European Energy Union – The social and societal dimension of the energy transition", rapporteur: Christophe Quarez, July 2020.

¹⁰ http://www.unido.org/fileadmin/user_media_upgrade/What_we_do/Topics/Women_and_Youth/Guide_on_Gender_Mainstreaming_ECC.pdf.

¹¹ See p. 10 (2016). Available on the Gender Mainstreaming Platform > Policy Areas > Energy <http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu>.

address gender issues¹²; and finally policies and programmes must be evaluated after they have been implemented. The Committee welcomes the intention to move in this direction demonstrated by the Commission in its most recent communication on equality.

3.4 Labour market gaps

3.4.1 Employment

3.4.1.1 In France, EDF prides itself on the fact that 25% of its staff and 27% of its executives are women – and yet French law requires a ratio of 40% women. Nonetheless, the company has launched a digital campaign looking for ideas to discuss, guide, persuade, promote and "develop women in the industry"¹³. As it stands, it is often **women themselves mobilising** to make their voices heard. For example, in Spain in 2018, 57 associations in the energy sector published a joint manifesto entitled "*En Energia NO sin Mujeres*"¹⁴ [*No to an energy sector without women*], declaring that it was time to have female experts in the public sphere in order to make the energy transition fairer and more sustainable. The European Commission emphasises that "the promotion of equality between women and men is a task for the Union, in all its activities", and thus for all Member States, where the average gender equality index score is just 67.4. In Austria, energy distribution companies have also developed programmes to attract women, often in cooperation with schools and universities¹⁵.

3.4.1.2 In the **nuclear sector**, the exclusion of women is perceived as having a degree of legitimacy, "given the dominance of scientific and technical professions, where there are still few women". The percentage of women at France's Nuclear and Alternative Energy Agency (CEA) is growing slowly: in 2018, they made up 33.8% of the total workforce, compared with 30% in 2008, accounting for 30.3% of managerial staff (26.5% of senior scientists) and 39.4% of other staff.

3.4.1.3 Women are still under-represented in the **oil and gas industries**, where they make up only 20% of employees, 17% of managers and 1% of CEOs¹⁶. They are gradually starting to be seen as "untapped reserves"; diversity could one day be a creative asset in technical professions and a solution to the generational and demographic divide. Stereotypes die hard, but they must be abandoned in favour of rebalancing employment. The effort still needs to be made by women, who must first engage in technical training.

3.4.1.4 Women in the energy sector, like other workers, have different statuses. They are also less well paid than men and more likely to be made redundant; in the EU, women are still

12 http://www.yellowwindow.be/genderresearch/download/YW2009_GenderToolkit_field4_Energy_001.pdf

13 <https://www.edfpulseandyou.fr/autres-themes/industrie-feminin/>

14 #EnEnergiaNoSinMujeres, manifesto signed by 57 associations in Spain.

15 See *Chancengleichheit zwischen Frauen und Männern in der Energiebranche [Equal opportunities for women and men in the energy sector]*, a study conducted by the Austrian Society for Environment and Technology (ÖGUT) for the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, October 2016.

16 Figures quoted at the World Petroleum Congress, Istanbul, 2017, from a study carried out by Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

disadvantaged by the fact that the social system relies on women giving up their personal time to carry out non-professional social and care tasks (e.g. looking after children and older people).

3.4.2 Skills

3.4.2.1 There is still a geographical factor and social pressure in the EU that prevents girls from accessing higher education. In some rural areas in southern Europe, certain sections of the population continue to feel that a girl's place is in the home. Their digital illiteracy permanently excludes them from energy-related professions, representing an overall loss of skills for society.

3.4.2.2 Everything starts with **training and skills**. According to EIGE, there is persistent segregation of male and female students across fields of study. Boys are more likely to go into the sciences, and girls with science degrees are often not working in technical professions a few years after graduation. Starting work at a company can be problematic: "I was treated the same as everyone else during my engineering studies, but everything changed when I started working. The plant hadn't been built with the idea that a woman might work there one day, and there was no appropriate radiation protection gear and no women's changing room"¹⁷, said one woman reporting her experience in a nuclear power plant at the start of her career. This is an experience that many can relate to. In 2017, although Croatian women obtained 60% of master of science degrees and 55% of doctoral degrees, they still suffered the effects of the glass ceiling when working in the energy sector, where the percentage of women in management structures continued to be between 13% and 16%, and 19% in listed companies.

3.4.2.3 In France, where less than 30% of those studying engineering are women, gender diversity is difficult to achieve in the EGI¹⁸ sector. In 2017, women's representation in the purely technical part of this sector was just 14%, whereas they were in the majority in the commercial and tertiary sectors. What is the added value of women? Is it to be social, a human face, capable of filing and making the coffee? Or is it to be technicians, engineers, researchers? Women need genuinely equal opportunities if they are to enter the energy industries, and recognition of their abilities if they are to stay and develop careers there. Spain has noticed that, despite the introduction of measures to increase accessibility for women, some are not geared towards technical sectors¹⁹. The stereotypes that mathematics and physics are for boys must be abolished by modifying the structure of studies, altering the attitudes of teachers and educating parents as soon as children start primary school so that women change the way they think about themselves. There are some inspiring examples: in Poland, the "Little Polytechnics for Children" project runs sessions for primary school children (girls and boys), familiarising them with technical subjects to prevent fear of STEM.

¹⁷ <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/women-in-the-nuclear-field-share-their-stories-at-international-womens-day-event>

¹⁸ EGIs: electrical and gas industries

¹⁹ "Steel women" initiative

3.5 Careers and salaries

3.5.1 It is not always easy for women to maintain a satisfactory work-life balance in these demanding careers. Due to a lack of role models, women sometimes drop out of their own accord. They need the solidarity of female sponsors and mentors – exceptional women who can show them the way and boost their confidence. The EESC believes that training for human resource managers in the sector should prepare them to be sensitive to and inventive for everyone – men and women – in managing their jobs and careers, so that careers now seen as exceptional become commonplace. In Croatia, women set up a network in 2019 inspired by CIGRE, a collaborative global community, to help each other develop their careers in energy²⁰. The Committee believes that introducing quotas to achieve equality on company boards would send a much-needed signal.

3.5.2 In their efforts to develop a STEM-based career (in science, technology, engineering or mathematics) in the energy sectors, women still face too many internal obstacles within their companies, in both the public and private sectors. The Commission calls for everyone to be "free to pursue their chosen path in life", in full equality. It needs to provide additional resources for women in a sector where physical strength is no longer of primary importance, but where this is still used as a yardstick of capacity. It must be possible to measure equality using qualitative indicators on career opportunities enjoyed, and by salary levels for the same qualification and grade. This should include basic salaries and bonuses. The EESC fully supports the objectives of the Equal Pay International Coalition in this respect²¹. It recommends introducing binding measures regarding the transparency of salaries and remuneration because this is a prerequisite for real equal pay.

3.6 The role of national and European social dialogue

The EESC believes that agreements reached should be incorporated into the governance of industries and businesses.

3.6.1 Collective agreements

Social dialogue has a crucial role to play in developing suitable working conditions, keeping women safe at work and providing them with job security in the energy sector. EGIs in France have signed a 4-year sectoral agreement with the trade unions, covering all areas in which action needs to be taken to make progress towards professional equality²². The CEA has a company-level agreement. It is very important, in all Member States, for such measures adopted by the social partners to be included in collective agreements, so that they have full legal force.

20 <https://www.cigre.org/GB/community/women-in-engineering>

21 <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/equality-and-discrimination/epic/lang--en/index.htm>; [OJ C 110, 22.3.2019, p. 26](#); [OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 101](#).

22 <https://sgeieg.fr/actualites/accord-relatif-a-egalite-professionnelle-entre-les-femmes-et-les-hommes-2019-2023>

3.6.2 CSR, "soft law"

Électricité de France is an example of a company that signed a CSR agreement with its trade unions in 2018 aiming to ensure gender diversity at all levels in the company and undertaking to promote female managers to key positions. This is based on making technical careers more attractive to young women, and on ensuring that men and women in the group are guaranteed equal opportunities throughout their careers. That is a fine commitment, but this is still "soft law", i.e. non-binding, requiring constant vigilance, particularly on the part of women, to ensure implementation and the necessary legal compliance.

4. Is the energy transition an opportunity or a risk for women?

4.1 Progress towards a **zero-carbon economy** is shifting modes of production towards smaller entities and short supply chains, and changing the balance between fossil fuels or nuclear power and renewable energy. Smart buildings that can store energy, smart grids, etc. make use of state-of-the-art techniques and information technologies, and artificial intelligence. In the pre-COVID-19 period, when oil prices were high, companies headed by women tended to invest in renewable energy and take into account threats to the environment²³. Women's participation in this sector was increasing, although it was still low in engineering (28% according to the International Renewable Energy Agency, IRENA). The destabilisation of energy markets caused by carbon energy losing value due to the crisis is likely to affect this trend.

4.2 The energy world is seeing, in these new, less "heavy", activities, a real need for diversity, novel skills, and profiles that are as representative as possible of society at large. It is recognised that society needs to take ownership of the transitions, with the energy transition feeding off the digital transition, and of their opportunities and, above all, their costs in terms of jobs and restructuring²⁴, and that we need women for this, but there are not yet many of them in this sphere.

4.3 Overall career profiles have not yet been established in the renewable energy sector. The Committee would like to warn against two temptations:

- 1) creating **reverse inequality**, with more women than men in the renewable energy sector;
- 2) using the energy and digital transitions to create **low-wage traps** in an overly "feminised" sector, and **career traps** whereby women find that doors are closed to them so that they cannot develop their careers in traditional energy sectors.

The Committee again calls for sectoral and company-level agreements on equality to be included in binding contractual law.

²³ <https://escholarship.org/>

²⁴ These lines, written in the middle of the coronavirus crisis, may no longer be relevant after the crisis.

5. Specific comments

5.1 **Maximising potential is an individual and collective challenge** in a European society that is ageing and facing fierce competition from talent from other major trading powers. Men and women need to combine highly diverse skills in a more cross-cutting energy context that makes use of platforms and networks. Management methods are changing as a result. However, digital illiteracy persists and an effort must be made to eradicate it across the EU. Work done these days is carried out within the framework of already established rights. It must deliver results quickly. Women's talents matter.

5.2 **Where to develop?** "Women would broaden the pool of available expertise" and "diversity is a key element in competitiveness"²⁵. Are artificial intelligence and the use of Big Data gender-specific? This field is wide open: we do not yet know all its applications, and it is an absolutely key area for Europe's international competitiveness, for both women and men. Women should be trained and encouraged to invest in the sector, and energy-related careers using it should be promoted among girls in schools and colleges, and in workplaces.

5.3 **Giving women the energy and the means to be decision-makers.** Businesses both small and large have increasingly high ethical expectations. And in this, too, the focus will be on women, because the structures being developed – geared towards decentralised energy production systems – would tend to increase gender equality in decision-making. It is recognised that women are likely to be motivated by different things from men, and that soft skills would be valuable in running a business. In the EESC's view, this realisation could be positive, but it could also be a trap perpetuating the status quo. Women must remain vigilant. In any case, equality is a right and must be reflected in women's careers and pay, regardless of crisis situations or demographic problems.

5.4 **Creating a European STEM College modelled on the college in Bruges, but with incremental quotas**

The EESC strongly urges the Commission to establish, as soon as possible, a post-graduate college in Brussels to be called the European STEM College²⁶, including an energy faculty with an initial quota of 80% female students on opening, with a view to achieving parity after a few years. Rather than waiting to find a team with the same tenacity as de Madariaga, Churchill, Spaak and De Gasperi who thought up the College of Europe in Bruges, the Committee recommends proposing the idea to the Council as soon as possible.

5.4.1 As with the college in Bruges, the Member States would be responsible for the initial selection of students and for funding them via scholarships. However, this would not prevent the Council from granting a budget to this centre of excellence. The training provided should be almost exclusively geared towards the knowledge and know-how involved in STEM-related activities,

²⁵ Cercle InterElles.

²⁶ Science, technology, engineering and mathematics. See *Energy, a networked Europe* by Michel Derdevet, lecturer at Sciences Po, Paris.

with practical programmes and courses that can be made multi-disciplinary, including one focusing on energy.

This flagship college would offer a European image of "de-gendered" excellence in energy-related careers, and would provide European added value to all national higher education institutions, and could thus serve as a role model and as a key lever in feminising the energy professions and bringing together all types of talent.

5.4.2 Like the College of Europe, which has branches in Bruges and Natolin (Poland), the European STEM College should have a number of branches across the EU, working in a network with existing structures at European level. These could include scientific clusters, for example the NGO Euro-CASE²⁷, which brings together national academies of engineering, applied sciences and technologies in 21 European countries, or the EIT (European Institute of Innovation and Technology) InnoEnergy²⁸, which is part of the Horizon 2020 programme and focuses on promoting innovation, entrepreneurship and education in the field of energy transition and sustainable energies, linking academia, entrepreneurs and research institutions²⁹ all along the value chain.

5.4.3 In conjunction with the EU Open Data Portal³⁰, which provides free, re-usable data, this would give the EU a powerful and enviable tool for gender integration and bridge-building with industries and research centres. All schools of excellence add value to the regions where they are located. European added value would have an even bigger influence.

5.5 Developing European energy outreach teams

There are already associations³¹ actively working to change the mindsets of young women so that they can see themselves in energy-related careers. Women in leadership roles in the sector are meeting and organising activities for girls and young women in schools and universities where they present their jobs and the range of energy-related professions. In Poland, an experiment called "Girl at the Polytechnic"³² has achieved very good results. It aimed to encourage women to study at technical secondary schools and break with stereotypes through various activities, including open days at these institutions. The EESC believes that it is crucial to systematise this approach by means of a direct exchange at European level through EU energy outreach teams. When the euro was introduced, teams of volunteers in all Member

²⁷ Euro-CASE, European Council of Applied Sciences, Technologies and Engineering www.euro-case.org; <https://www.euro-case.org/reinhard-huttel-president-of-euro-case/>

²⁸ EIT-InnoEnergy, innoenergy.com.

²⁹ See *Energy, a networked Europe* by Michel Derdevet, lecturer at Sciences Po, Paris, and secretary-general (2013-2019) and member of the managing board of Enedis.

³⁰ data.europa.eu: European Union Open Data Portal.

³¹ The *Énergies de femmes* network at EDF; women4energy.eu (innoenergy/EIT, led by Steinbeis 2i GmbH); ellesbougent.com; <http://www.interelles.com/colloques-interelles/actes-complets-du-colloque-2019>: conference on *L'IA a-t-elle un sexe? [Does AI have a gender?]*.

³² The programme started in 2007; the percentage of girls at polytechnics increased from 30.6% to 36%. <http://www.dziewczynynapolitechniki.pl/pdfy/raport-kobiety-na-politechnikach2019.pdf>.

States, under the aegis of the Commission's local representations, went out to talk to the public and explain what would change with the advent of the single currency.

- 5.5.1 In the same way European energy outreach teams could talk to female students to explain how research, technology, supply, trans-European networks, pricing, regulatory systems and energy markets work, and all of the roles those students could play in these areas.
- 5.5.2 The task of the teams would be to tell young women at school and university about engineering and technical careers and generate enthusiasm for such careers. The teams should be made up of women who can act as role models and show that these (stereotypically "masculine") careers are accessible to girls.
- 5.5.3 At a professional level, the teams could share good practices and promote links and exchanges with other networks and associations in the EU. Men would also be involved, in particular by providing mentoring, but women would have more impact as role models. A European network of women could be created, as part of an EU-funded project, and would act as a conduit to the European STEM College.
- 5.6 At the European institutions and bodies, the development that has already begun needs to be stepped up by increasing women's participation so as to achieve parity among energy regulators³³.

Brussels, 18 September 2020.

Luca JAHIER

The President of the European Economic and Social Committee

³³ EESC opinion on *Gender Equality Strategy* (SOC/633), rapporteur: Giulia Barbucci, co-rapporteur: Indrė Vareikytė, July 2020 (not yet published in the OJ).