



Europe III

The voice of Group III Various Interests April 2014

President Luca JAHIER (centre) with Mr Evangelos Venizelos (left), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic and Mr Margaritis Schinas (right), Director and Head of Greece Operations, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, European Commission at the inaugural session of the conference



Report of major conference organised by the Various Interests Group in Athens – 20 March 2014

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Editorial

'From Austerity to Growth and Recovery: overcoming the socio-economic challenges of Greece's recovery'

What needs to be done to ensure the sustainable development of Greece? Who are the actors? How do we balance the social and economic needs of the country and of Europe at large? What sort of Europe do we want? These are some of the issues that we debated at the extraordinary meeting of the Various Interests Group in Athens on 20 March 2014, during the conference 'From Austerity to Growth and Recovery: overcoming the socio-economic challenges of Greece's recovery'.

Bringing together more than 170 participants from the 28 EU Member States and Greek civil society, the event explored the steps to be taken towards renewal and recovery in a Greece and Europe of social cohesion, thus reflecting the objectives of the Greek Presidency of the Council of the EU for a Europe with a 'common aspiration of growth, employment, security, prosperity and democracy'. In the magnificent neo-classical building of the Greek authorities, the Zappeion Megaron, we were honoured by the participation of Mr Evangelos Venizelos, Deputy Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, Ms Olga Kefalogianni, Minister for Tourism, Mr Athanasios Skordas, Deputy Minister for Development and Competitiveness and Ms Anna Diamantopoulou, former EU Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs.

"Certainly what we do not want is a Europe only of austerity. What we do want is a Europe which is strong and competitive, but also social and cohesive". With these words I called for the right balance to be found between austerity, fiscal responsibility and growth-promoting measures in Greece.

For what is urgently needed is job creation, support to the real economy, the circulation of liquidity to SMEs, the promotion of exports, competitiveness and poverty reduction. Although there are positive signs of economic recovery in Greece, such as the fiscal primary surplus in 2013 and the deficit reductions, there is still a great deal that needs to be done. In Athens, we heard how the crisis has had a devastating impact on the social, economic and political fabric of the country, which has led to multiple interrelated crisis: not only socio-economic and financial, but also poverty, energy, environmental and demographic. Despite progress in combatting tax evasion and fraud and in improving administrative capacity, there is still a lot of progress required. As indeed it is still necessary to respect consumer rights and to provide quality services of general interest, even in times of austerity. The question is: how is a country like Greece to re-build itself with such a heavy socio-economic burden?

In Athens, we began our conference by admitting that errors have been made. Errors were made in Greece with the public finances and in the selection of some of the austerity measures, errors were made in the architecture of the European Single Currency and errors were made by the Troika in its miscalculation of the impact of the first austerity programme on Greece's recession, the so-called multiplier effect. But we also looked at possible solutions, first and foremost as a way of alleviating the desperately high levels of unemployment in Greece, notably youth unemployment. So in the conclusions of the conference we called for additional EU and national funds to be made available under the Youth Guarantee Scheme, for upgrading vocational and technical training and for the implementation of the Council

Recommendation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning. We also stressed the necessity to urgently restore liquidity to the market, notably to SMEs and social economy enterprises, which are the backbone of the economy and labour market. What we need now is for the banks to re-start lending and for alternative funding through an EU 'SME Initiative' and via the European Investment Bank to be actually implemented. Of course we also must progress towards establishing the banking union and to rapidly introduce the Single Resolution Mechanism.

Equally important is to complete the Internal Market and to revise and implement the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Compact for Growth and Jobs. Priority should be placed on taking advantage of the Single Market, on investing in re-industrialising Europe, in innovation, research and development. In the case of Greece, we heard how greater investment should be made in the tourism, solar and energy sectors and listened to the objectives of the Greek authorities for a 'Comprehensive Maritime Policy' which would have a direct positive impact on sustainable growth. Above all, actions towards reviving Greece's economy must be complemented by growth and equity promoting measures, by social innovation, inter-generational solidarity, poverty reduction and inclusiveness. It is my firm belief that Europe now needs a new European Social Action Programme, we need to set minimum guaranteed incomes and to introduce socially responsible investment, for example, through the establishment of European Social Bonds. Much of the funding for the above should come from the EU's Social and Structural Funds, but also from the social innovation of Greece's civil society. For it is the country's SMEs, liberal professions, its green economy and

social enterprises and wider social economy actors who with their grassroots approach can respond to local needs, are integral to social cohesion, to capacity-building and are already providing innovative, equitable and inclusive employment opportunities in Greece. At the conference we called upon the Greek authorities to recognise and to support these new civil society initiatives. Such initiatives provide the necessary solutions and innovation which are central to re-building the fabric and social capital of Greek society.

Last but not least, at our conference on 20 March we looked at the issues of democratic accountability and legitimacy of both the EU and the activities of the Troika. It was argued that it crucial to re-build trust between citizens and politicians and that trust will only be re-built by delivering results which positively affect the everyday lives of citizens and by better communicating Europe to citizens. We also welcomed the initiative of the European Parliament to make the activities of the Troika accountable to the European Parliament.

However, if there is one thing that we learnt in Athens, it is that despite six years of crushing austerity, Greek citizens still have the determination, entrepreneurship and pride to exit the crisis as soon as possible. In a country where history imbues all aspects of life, this difficult time in Greece's history will be remembered, endured and overcome with dignity.

Luca JAHIER, President of the Various Interests Group of the EESC

More about the event can be consulted here: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-greece-growth-recovery>

SPECIAL FEATURE: Civil Society Day 2014

18 March 2014



Conny Reuter
Co-Chair of the Liaison Group at the EESC
Secretary General of SOLIDAR

More than 250 participants including an important number of EESC members from all 3 groups were present at the CSD 2014. Besides the plenary sessions, three workshops were organized on 1) An economy for Europe 2) Social Europe and 3) Active European Citizenship. Vice-President Willms called in his opening speech for a more active participation in the design of policies and for meeting the needs and expectations of citizens based on the European values like freedom, solidarity and equality.

Between the Plan for Europe, which is currently being discussed within the EESC, and the recommendations of the European Year of Active Citizenship Alliance as the result of the European Year 2013, the debates referred to the lack of trust of citizens in the institutions. All contributions including the speeches at the opening and closing plenaries underlined

the urgency of the situation which is beyond agendas and manifestos, the urgency to tackle social imbalances in and between the member states by developing a sustainable economic growth paradigm linking the economic and social progress, investment in social infrastructure, education, health and care.

And the urgency to involve better civil society through the recognition of its role as bridge builders between the citizens and the institutions, as called for by the Chair of the European Year Alliance Jean-Marc Roirant. The legitimacy of both the European Institutions and civil society organisations is regularly questioned, but the relevant question is the improvement of their cooperation. As underlined by the MEP Jean Lambert, "your voice is more than your vote" and only by improving the cooperation, the voice of citizens can really

be heard. And this should be secured by financial support which shall only translate the recognition of this role and shall facilitate a real partnership.

The Civil Society Day has shown that the EESC is the House of Civil Society and the work and the debates of the House can be enriched by citizens engaged in European and national civil society networks which are actually gathered in the Liaison Group.

To read more about this event, please go to:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.civil-society-civil-society-day>

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.press-releases.31309>

Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role



Group III Vice-President, Pavel Trantina (seated second from the left on the podium)

I participated in a panel of the closing conference of RE: DIALOGUES project, organised in the European Parliament on 20 February 2014. The project, run by social firms around Europe, aims at discussing ways how social firms should be systematically represented in social dialogue as a key player alongside the traditional participants, namely employers' and employees' representatives. There were a number of very practical recommendations discussed with social partners and two avenues have been addressed in the context of the RE: DIALOGUES project regarding strengthening the voice of social economy in social dialogue: the role of the participatory social economy in European consultation structures via the European Economic and Social Committee, and in European consultation structures via sector-specific social dialogue. The role of EESC Group III and Social Economy category was highlighted several times.

share their views and aspirations for the forthcoming EP elections. Just over a year ago, NCW was showcasing female candidates for the General elections. However, NCW believes in equality as well as in gender balance so both male and female candidates were invited for this conference. The President remarked that the Council would be happy to have a 50-50 male-female representation in the national parliament as the newly elected Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, has opted for the Italian government.

In addressing the candidates, the President pointed out that guests would like to hear about the different fields of expertise, the particular sectors that Maltese candidates would wish to contribute to, their aspirations and objectives as to why they believe that their presence in such an institution as the European Parliament, can make a difference for Europe and for Malta, as the voice of civil society, the voice of all citizens and that their presence there will reassure Maltese citizens that they are well represented. The President referred to the financial crisis that has made us all realise the value of work, the need to create new jobs. 'We would like to hear your opinion on job creation, the mobility of workers from one country to another seeking better pay or just a different way of life, how people look at these job take ups and third country immigrants as workers'. In conclusion, NCW President stated that all look forward to a United Europe, in the hope that together we will be able to build a Europe of values, a Europe that can address the needs of the most vulnerable; a Europe that the next five years and beyond will lead us into a global playing field where we, Maltese, although a small island can reach our aspirations.

EESC member Grace Attard spoke about the role of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), established over 50 years ago, by the Treaty, through which it is mandatory for the EU Commission to consult the EESC on matters that the EU Commission issues – whether they are communications, directives or regulations. The work of the EESC brings together employers representatives, workers representatives and groups of varied interests representing the various sectors of society, youth, the elderly, professionals, farmers, women, SMEs, the social economy, environmentalists, consumers' representatives and many others from all Member States. It also prepares own-initiative opinions or exploratory opinions on matters that have not received enough attention or no attention at all. It is not surprising that the EESC is 'The bridge between the EU Institutions and Civil Society'. Grace Attard spoke about the spirit of 'consensus' that underlines decision-making through the different study groups, although this is not always easy. What is most important is that the opinions and reports of the EESC pave the way for decisions to be taken by Parliament or Council, as they offer positions that have been agreed upon by all sectors of society and this makes it clearer and easier in which direction decisions need to be taken. She finally appealed to Parliament to reconsider the number of Maltese EESC members which is currently five, to be extended to six as a minimum number, which will allow the Maltese members to cope better with all their duties as members of the EESC.

In all, 17 candidates, from all three political parties participated in the Press Conference and the following questions served as the basis for the first part of the Conference:

- Why did you decide to contest these elections?
- In which sectors do you think you can contribute most?
- What will be the added value for Maltese citizens and Malta if you are elected?

Each candidate made a brief intervention about their aims focusing on the following wide range of areas - from migration, foreign affairs, quality of work, the creation of jobs, human rights, the value of sports, the growing importance of civil society in a structured consultation process and decision-making at all levels, addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, the importance of a macro regional strategy for the Mediterranean region and not least the social dimension in addressing the financial crisis. Emphasis was given to the importance that all MEPs of different parties should work as a team, focusing on solutions, accountability and transparency and the strengthening value. During the lively interactive discussion and questions from the floor a number of issues and questions were addressed. One of the most important issues which kept coming up again and again in the course of the discussion related to situations where a decision needs to be taken reflecting the national interest versus overall EU position and how the future MEPs would deal with it. In the course of the cross interventions most of the candidates tried to come up with an adequate definition of 'national interest' which however was quite controversial, in particular when it came to positions such as the financial transactions tax, increase in maternity leave among others. Other issues raised were the question of being a Maltese national and a European citizen and how this can work. Interventions



Tom JONES (UK)
Member of the Various Interests Group

Going Local event in Scotland on 20 February 2014

As part of the EESC'S Going Local, a forum was jointly hosted in Scotland with the lead Voluntary Sector Organisation – SCVO on the 20th of February to discuss the work of the EESC and general European relevance for the Sector in Scotland. The Event known as 'The Gathering' attracts thousands of voluntary sector and public visitors and participants and this year celebrated its 10th Anniversary. I attended the European Forum and deputised for my colleague Maureen O'Neill and gave a presentation on the role of the EESC, its links to civil society and its current programme of work.



Group III member, Grace Attard (holding the microphone)
NCW Vice President
Member of the Bureau of the Various Interests Group and of the Bureau of the EESC

Your MEP: The Voice of Civil Society in Europe

Report of a Going Local event in Malta and an EESC-NCW Press Conference with Maltese Candidates for European Elections on Monday 17 March 2014 at the Dar I-Ewropa in Valetta

NCW President Mary Gaerty welcomed the Maltese candidates for the forthcoming European Parliament elections, members of the press and guests for accepting the invitation by the National Council of Women in collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to

Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role (continued)

from the floor asked about representation of foreigners living in Malta, the right of elderly persons to work and to remain active and intergenerational cooperation, adequate pensions; the introduction of a minimum wage among others. 'A Europe of Nations' was the theme that took up the end part of the discussion, including European values such as accepting diversity, gender, minorities, the disabled, respecting the views of others and reaching consensus in highly contentious matters

Grace Attard concluded by referring to the initiatives of the EESC to encourage citizens to make use of their right to vote; in fact this event was part of the 'Going Local' events that the EESC Communication Group has launched to further inform citizens in all member states of 'A Europe we all wish to see'. In conclusion, Dr Peter Agius, Head of the European Parliamentary Office in Malta gave an overview of the initiatives the Office is taking during this very important period before the forthcoming EP elections praising all the different sectors of Maltese society, who are taking the initiative to make use of Europa House by organising different events to ensure there is an informed debate about the European Union – which we all look at as a Europe of values in the near future. NCW President augured success to all candidates and thanked all those present for a lively and mature debate



Group III member Reine-Claude MADER (FR)
Spokesperson for the Consumers' and Environment Category of the EESC
Member of the Bureau of the Various Interests Group

European Consumers' Day – Thessaloniki a day of citizens' debate

We were counting on some exciting debates at the 16th Consumers' Day on the theme of "Consumer protection and social inclusion at a time of crisis", held by the Economic and Social Committee in Thessaloniki on 14 March 2014, and indeed this was the case. In a country where 34,6 % of the population has been affected by the crisis and 27,5 % are out of work, over-indebtedness and social inclusion are not just abstract ideas. They are part of a harsh reality which must be faced if even basic needs are to be met. Unfortunately, Greece is far from being an isolated case. Other countries have also been affected, with the economic situation raising questions about our consumer society. The numerous participants in the meeting agreed that consumer protection should continue, and was more necessary than ever at a time of crisis. Appropriate solutions for persons in difficulty should be provided wherever necessary. The underlying theme of the debate was the need to prevent entire sections of the population from being socially excluded. This would require efforts by all concerned, at all levels. The Economic and Social Council has been concerned with social cohesion issues for many years, and is putting forward proposals in an endeavour to prevent over-indebtedness and to manage this problem in all EU countries so that those concerned are given a second chance. We hope that the European Parliament will follow up on these proposals.



Group III member Mall HELLAM (EE)
President of the Follow-up Committee on "EU-Russia"
Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on "Civil Society in Russia" - REX/400

Solidarity event "For Ukraine" in Tallinn

I was involved with the solidarity concert/action organised on March 16 in Tallinn, Estonia. In spite of the awful weather couple of thousand people came together. My speech was as follows:

"Dear Friends! The Estonian people have followed the events in Ukraine in the recent months with a worrying heart. We have seen the aspiration for freedom and the steadfastness of the Ukrainian people; we have seen the fight of this great and strong nation for the right to finally choose their own way. Today's support concert is a tribute to Ukraine. It's a tribute to all those who this winter on Maidan in Kiev demonstrated to the whole world how a true free spirited civic society works. In the peaceful Europe words like self-determination and independence might sound self-evident especially for the younger generation. Aggression and occupation were believed to be topics of the history books in Europe. However for the people in Estonia and the whole Central and Eastern Europe these words still have a strong meaning. For us it's not far history but recent past that our parents and grandparents remember very well. Let's remember: 1939 – Tallinn, 1956 – Budapest, 1968 Prague. And yet again is the Kremlin using its old tested tricks, this time to threaten and invade Ukraine. We, the Estonian NGOs demand a stop to the aggression against

Ukraine to enable a peaceful and democratic development of the united Ukraine. The Ukrainian civic society can only build a new and open Ukraine freely and creatively if the human and basic rights of the people are ensured, if the freedom of speech and assembly is granted, if the independence of the media and justice system is ensured and the rule of law prevails. Thank you to all musicians and all of you, dear friends who share these values.

Finally, I want to quote the Hungarian freedom poet Sándor Petőfi, dedicating it to the young Ukrainian mother whose new-born son's father was killed on 20th February while defending Maidan:"

"Freedom and love,
these two things I need.
For love I sacrifice my life,
For freedom I sacrifice my love."

The whole concert can be watched here: etv.err.ee/arhiiv.php?id=147442

My speech (in Estonian) is available here: <http://vimeo.com/893383653>



Dilyana Slavova (BG)
President of the NAT Section
Member of the Bureau of Group III

The Role of Women in the Post-2015 Framework

The EESC organised an extremely interesting and well attended conference, "A NEW GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP: European Civil Society Positions on the Post-2015 Framework" on 13-14 February 2014 in Brussels. We strongly hope that the conference conclusions and recommendations will provide timely input to the upcoming Communication of the European Commission, which will lay the ground for a more detailed EU position at the launch of the negotiations in 2014.

We have heard policy-makers, scientists and researchers talk about the enormous challenges ahead of us, and we debated with a wide range of civil society representatives the opportunities to ensure well-being for all, inclusive and sustainable development within the planetary boundaries, and good governance as a basic precondition for sustainability.

For me one message that came up continuously during these debates was the need to establish a new form of partnership involving all layers and sectors of our society, and based on solidarity, equity, mutual respect and cooperation. I consider that gender equality should be central to the post-2015 framework.

'Women do two-thirds of all the work in the world. They produce over 50 % of the food, but earn less than 1 % of the income and own less than 10 % of the property. It will be an enormous challenge to overcome this depth of inequality.' (Confederation for Relief and Development – CONCORD)

"Gender inequality persists and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work and economic assets, and participation in government. Violence against women continues to undermine efforts to meet all goals. Further progress to 2015 and beyond will largely depend on success of these interrelated challenges." Says the UN Millennium Goals Report 2012.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for growth and poverty reduction. Recognising this, the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education was included as a standalone Millennium Development Goal. However, in the developing world women suffer disproportionately from poverty and its related consequences, such as malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy. This is compounded by unequal access to basic human rights, employment, information, social services, infrastructure and natural resources.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women as development actors and peace-builders has been mainstreamed in all EU development policies and programmes through its 2010 'Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development'. And in its February 2013 Communication 'A Decent Life for All', the EU asserts that the post-2015 framework should include the empowerment of women and gender equality as vital components for inclusive and sustainable development, as well as important values in their own right.

Nevertheless, we need to finish the unfinished business of the current MDGs, filling gaps, learning lessons and sharing existing best practices. We need to address outstanding issues impeding progress for women: violence against women, women's political participation and economic empowerment, as well as broader issues such as access to education.

Otherwise our granddaughters are going to raise and put this problem as the next century goal. Yes, indeed the goal is really sustainable...

OUR GROUP'S STRENGTH

The **SMEs, Crafts and Liberal Professions Category** held a meeting on 1st of April 2014, in the morning. The spokesperson, Panagiotis Gkofas (EL), presented the latest developments and gave an overview of his activities over the past months. Members also had an opportunity to conduct a thematic debate on the "Crowdfunding in the EU – Exploring the added value of potential EU action" with interventions of representatives of the European Commission DG MARKT, Maria Teresa Fabregas Fernandez, as well as of the BUSINESSEUROPE SME Department, Daniel Cloquet and of the President of European Crowdfunding Network, Oliver Gajda. The spokesperson of the "Consumers and Environment"

category, Reine-Claude Mader (FR), intervened to provide the point of view of consumers on the topic. A presentation by Deborah Dawton from Design Business Association, specialist in design and investment was followed by a lively debate.

To consult the programme and read the presentations, please go to:
<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.smes-professions-and-crafts-category-documents.30843>

More information on the work of the categories can be found on our website, by contacting the spokespersons of the categories, or the Secretariat of Group III at: gr3@eesc.europa.eu.



Quote of the month...



"Life is beautiful, love is beautiful, nature and music are beautiful..... everything we experience is a gift, a present we should cherish and pass on to those we love."

Alice Herz-Sommer (1903 -2014)

The world's oldest known Holocaust survivor

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Herz-Sommer

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/world-s-oldest-holocaust-survivor-dies-aged-110-1.1702631>

Overview of our Members' Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 25-26 March the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.



Lutz RIBBE (DE) – NAT/620 “Market-based instruments towards a resource efficient and low carbon economy in the EU” (EESC opinion 6638/2013)

In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC states that progress in the transition to a resource efficient and low carbon economy has been too slow. **If we are to achieve the EU's objectives for 2050, we have to speed up the process.** Together with a clear, effective, strong and efficient regulatory framework, consequent and predictable market-based instruments (MBIs) should play a key role in continuing to sustainably incentivise the investments needed to make this transition possible. **Environmental and climate policies should not be seen as a burden in the recovery from the fiscal and economic and social crisis, but rather as a part of the solution.** The Committee urges the Commission to make environmental fiscal reform an integral and permanent part of the European Semester. The use of MBIs in the EU at the moment is not sufficiently consistent and coherent. EU Member States do not fully exploit the opportunities the transition to a low-carbon economy can offer for the innovation and modernisation of European industry and boosting employment. We need to strengthen and enhance MBIs in a way that sends a strong and coherent signal to the markets. **Given the EU's objective of eliminating not justified environmentally subsidies by 2020, the Committee is concerned about the lack of sufficient activities to ensure that this goal is achieved.**



Mario CAMPLI (IT) – INT/734 “Statute for a European Mutual Society: views, role and contribution of civil society” (EESC opinion 778/2014)

In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC urges the Commission, in accordance with the commitments it made at the Strasbourg event on social entrepreneurship, to **move quickly to introduce the legislative proposal on the draft regulation on the Statute for a European Mutual Society.** The committee wishes the mutualistic model to be recognised through a coherent European-level legal framework consistent with its economic weight and social role and recommends that **the statute should be concerned with governance rather than activities,** in order to maintain

the wide variety of mutual societies. Finally, the EESC feels that the statute should not aim to harmonise national laws and that it should be optional and calls for a precise timetable for the presentation and adoption of the draft Statute for a European Mutual Society to be made public.



Arno METZLER (DE) – INT/687 “The role and future of the liberal professions in European civil society 2020” (EESC opinion 1748/2013)

In this own-initiative opinion, the Committee asserts that **the system of liberal professions is a component of free civil society in Europe.** While the term “liberal professions” is not used in all Member States, the concept, and the associated societal problems and solutions, can be found throughout the EU. **A common EU-wide definition of “liberal profession” should be developed, which simply sets out the general features of liberal professions and lists the categories of occupations covered.** Any such definition must not prevent the creation of new liberal professions. The draft charter for the liberal professions drawn up by the various European professional organisations, led by the Council of European Dentists (CED), could be used as a model for this purpose. The Member States essentially use two different approaches to regulating the liberal professions: what is known as “principles-based regulation”, and a more proscriptive and prescriptive approach referred to as “rules-based regulation”. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. However, the particular issues and solutions may change over time, requiring changes to the rules or the creation of new ones. The regular reviews of the rules carried out by the EU are useful in this connection, and should also be established at national level. Finally, the EESC opinion addresses a range of other issues related to the role and future of the liberal professions in Europe.



Reine-Claude MADER (FR) – INT/724 “Establishing a European Small Claims Procedure and creating a European order for payment procedure” (EESC opinion 025/2014)

In this opinion, the EESC welcomes the proposed regulation, which is intended to facilitate trade within the internal market and improve access to justice in cross-border disputes. It supports the proposal to extend the procedure's scope by raising the ceiling and broadening

the concept of “cross-border disputes” and endorses the proposal to limit the costs of proceedings, but recommends to clearly define that term to ensure that the measure is effective. Moreover, the Committee considers that all ways and means of making procedures easier for the parties (including the use of new technologies) should be supported. **It reiterates the need to provide for consumers and SMEs to have access to assistance throughout proceedings and emphasises the role of consumer associations, European consumer centres and business federations in this respect.** Finally, the EESC draws attention to the fact that the stated aim of encouraging the regulation of small disputes will not be achieved unless appropriate information on its existence is made available and it considers that in order to be effective, the procedural forms must be clear and easy for everyone to understand.



Michael SMYTH (UK) – INT/739 “The participation of the European Union in the capital increase of the European Investment Fund” (EESC opinion 1436/2014)

The EESC supports the move to **recapitalise the European Investment Fund (EIF) to allow it to expand its roles as provider of risk capital to high growth and innovative small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).** The decision to increase the EIF's subscribed capital by up to EUR 1.5 billion represents a significant boost to EIF investment potential in the context of the economic crisis and the stagnation of the European economy, it is right to pose the question as to whether even this increase is too small? **Recent surveys and data on SME finance and bank lending show that access to finance (both investment and working capital) is the most pressing problem facing SMEs. The growth in bank lending to business has fallen in each of the last three months.** While the EIF remit is specific to innovation business and high growth, **is there not a case for an even larger recapitalisation of the Fund to enable it to do even more?** The EESC restates its call for the EIF to be substantially recapitalised to fulfil the role originally envisaged for it – namely as a European venture capital fund and a special remit to finance high-tech start-ups.

NOTE: The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee's website: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search>

Highlights of the March 2014 EESC Plenary Session

Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Mr Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “A European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism3 – INT/740.

Mr Miguel-Angel CABRA DE LUNA (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Crowd-funding in the EU” – INT/741.

Mr Michael SMYTH (UK) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Follow-up to the Green Paper: Long-term financing of the European economy” – ECO/365.

Mr Krzysztof PATER (PL) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Review of Institutions for Occupational Retirement Pensions Directive” – SOC/509.

Mr Eugen LUCAN (RO) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Aid scheme for the supply of fruit and vegetables, bananas and milk in the educational establishments” – NAT/462.

Mrs Anne-Marie SIGMUND (AT) is the President of the ad hoc group for: “The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).



The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-new-study-groups>

News from Group III



The Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) will hold a conference entitled **Let's talk Happiness: beyond GDP** on 10 June 2014 at the EESC headquarters in Brussels. The objective of the conference is to debate complementary indicators on well-being and social progress in the context of a transition to an alternative mode of growth.

THE AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE INCLUDE:

- State of affairs: Where we are today. The usefulness of indicators behind GDP, analysis of

their strengths and weaknesses. How can we measure well-being in developed countries

- Democratic challenges: Bridging the gap with citizens. The respective role of Institutions and of Civil society in the selection and monitoring of indicators of well-being.
- Political commitment: Long term commitment on the production of well-being indicators alongside GDP. Where and when do we take action on the choice and follow-up of indicators? How actions taken today might affect future well-being? Europe 2020, Post 2015, NSSD, etc.

The conference will provide the opportunity to reflect on how to define and measure the well-being of European citizens and the sustainability of their lifestyles. The event also aims to provide an overview of the work done on this topic. It is hoped that research and field experience of stakeholders will demonstrate the importance and urgency of reconsidering wealth indicators as a means to reframing the current debate on economic policy.