

**ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTS AND SECRETRARIES-GENERAL**

**OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCILS OF THE EU**

**AND THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE**

**BRATISLAVA, 14-15 JUNE 2018**

Austria Trend Hotel, Bratislava

**Concept Note**

**The future of Europe and  
the role of civil society in shaping the future Union**

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1. **Introduction**

2018 is a year in which the expression "Future of Europe" has been more present than at any other time since the signing of the Rome Treaty. Foresight and planning are needed at all times in a complex environment such as the European Union, but the changes – political, economic, social, environmental, technological and geopolitical – occurring in the current era have created the need for a deep and wide-ranging examination of what the future of Europe – indeed of the EU, should be, and how to achieve it. The European Economic and Social Committee has been an active participant in this regard, both as the main representative body of organised civil society in Europe and as the guardian of the interests of social, economic and civic stakeholders in the EU's interinstitutional framework.

The main catalysts for the discussion were the UK vote in the Brexit referendum, the stagnation affecting institutional reform and EU economic growth following the financial crisis, and the fact that it took a long time to get the economy back on the path to recovery. The fact that an important, long-standing Member State decided to withdraw from the EU at the same time that a number of countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, were actively pursuing membership, triggered a period of soul searching for the EU. As a result it gave greater credence to the long-standing calls for vigilant and much-needed reform.

Yet the question still remains: "What kind of Europe do we want?"

The debate on the future of Europe was launched by the Commission with the presentation of its White Paper on 1 March 2017, in which it laid out five broad scenarios for the future of European integration (five reflection papers were also published in May and June of the same year). The White Paper was accompanied by a declaration on the part of the leaders of 27 Member States and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, which was signed in Rome on 25 March 2017. The debate will culminate in an extraordinary European summit to be held in Sibiu (Romania) on 9 May 2019. At this summit, the Heads of State and Government are due to adopt an agenda setting out the strategy and main political priorities for the 2019-2024 period.

In the context of the debate on the future of Europe, several institutional meetings have been planned as part of a Leaders' Agenda, adopted at the European Council on 19 October 2017. The first such meeting – a euro-area summit – took place on 14-15 December last year and aimed to discuss the deepening of EMU and the Banking Union. In connection with this, on 6 December the Commission proposed a comprehensive package of measures. A second meeting was held on 23 February 2018 to discuss, among other things, political priorities for the next multiannual financial framework. Other meetings are planned between now and the end of March 2019 to discuss, in particular, the deepening of EMU, the future of the Single Market and defence issues.

In addition, the Commission is expected to put forward a range of proposals on reforming the EU. These were included in the Roadmap for a More United, Stronger and More Democratic Union presented by Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union address on 13 September 2017; they relate to EMU and the new Multiannual Financial Framework (mentioned above), the future of EU policy on climate and energy (June 2018), strengthening subsidiarity and proportionality and better regulation in the day-to-day running of the EU (September 2018), the search for greater efficiency in the EU (September 2018) and respect for the rule of law (October 2018).

The turning point should remain the May 2019 Extraordinary European Summit in Sibiu. By then, the way forward ought to have been defined, as immediately afterwards a new European Parliament will be elected (May) and a new European Commission will take office (November).

The European Parliament also contributed to the debate when, in February 2017, it adopted two resolutions on possible changes to the current EU set up and on how the current Lisbon Treaty provisions could be better used in order to improve and facilitate the functioning of the EU.

Following on from the Commission's White Paper, a large number of civil society organisations and think tanks presented numerous reports, policy briefs and publications, setting out their own views on the future of Europe by means of various scenarios, both broad and topical, that looked at how the EU could/should look in the years to come.

Finally, this year the European Commission, together with the Council, has launched "citizens' consultations" in the EU27 Member States. The launch event for this process took place at the EESC on 5 May and the period of consultations will continue until October 2018. The conclusions of these consultations will be presented at the December European Council. In relation to this, national ESCs might consider the possibility of cooperating with their respective national government when holding these consultations in order to contribute to ensuring their representativeness in terms of involving organised civil society and ensuring that their concerns and aspirations are duly taken into account.

1. **The European Economic and Social Committee's input**

The European Economic and Social Committee has been and continues to be an active voice in the debate. It issued an opinion (rapporteurs: Luca Jahier & José Isaías Rodríguez García-Caro) as early as 2015 on the two reports of the European Parliament, at the latter's request.

In July 2017, it adopted a Resolution on the *Commission's White paper on the Future of Europe and beyond* which was preceded, in May and June 2017, by national debates involving over 1000 organised civil society representatives in 27 EU Member States through its "Going Local" programme, which it then compiled into another report.

In its resolution, the EESC concludes that the EU Member States need to work together with a common sense of purpose, which is to strengthen the capacity of the EU *"to deliver in providing fully-fledged equal opportunities for all. Economic, social and environmental factors are interrelated. It is essential to enable the continent to adjust to the deep transformation process and fierce competition across the globe, and to effectively shape globalisation according to the EU's values."*

The EESC also stresses the need for more cohesive governance, deeper integration and full commitment on the part of Member States in the following areas:

* a coordinated European industrial policy based on fair competition;
* the promotion of upward social convergence in terms of employment and social outcomes, through the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
* an Energy Union with proper governance;
* a forward-looking European strategy and legislative framework to fight climate change and promotion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development across EU policies;
* a Digital Single Market as an important element of future competitiveness and promoting quality job creation, while anticipating the effects of digital transformation;
* an enhanced Europe-wide technology, research and innovation strategy;
* a (multilateral) trade policy which should ensure open markets and social and environmental sustainability

Furthermore and on the occasion of its 60th anniversary on 24 May last, which focused on the role of the Committee in the future of Europe debate, the EESC president, Luca Jahier, made a declaration setting out five key ideas on the future of Europe: 1) reinforcing a Union of Values: democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights, human dignity and freedom are non-negotiable; 2) investing in solid and shared growth, ensuring a smooth transition to a society that is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms; 3) reinforcing the European Social Model, protecting and caring for all citizens, ensuring workers' rights, life-long-learning, employment and social inclusion; 4) fostering a new European narrative through culture and education, encouraging creativity and intercultural exchange and enhancing a sense of belonging and purpose; 5) promoting structured and stronger dialogue with citizens, paying genuine attention to their challenges, strengthening civil society organisations and promoting structured consultations and dialogue (please see Annex I for the full text of the declaration).

Two main questions seem important for a civil society debate on the Future of Europe and could form the basis of our Annual Meeting discussions:

**In what way** can European civil society and its economic, social and civic representatives have an impact on the debate about the EU?

And what should be the main priority areas for concern and discussion?

In light of the above two questions, we should reflect on how the EESC and the national Economic and Social Councils can contribute, working together, to the preparation of the European Parliament elections and of the Sibiu Summit and to the priorities and working programme of the new European Commission.

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Appendix I: Declaration of the President, 23 May 2018



***European Economic and Social Committee***

**EN**

Brussels, 23 May 2018

**Declaration of the President  
  
on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the European Economic and Social Committee**

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***Europe at Work:  
Organised civil society for a sustainable common future***

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# The responses to the multiple crises that the European Union has been confronted with have increasingly led European citizens to become disenchanted not only with the European Union itself but also with democratic institutions in general – both at the  European and national level. There is a serious risk of EU citizens no longer seeing the added value of the EU for their living and working conditions as well as for their future perspectives and those of their children and for losing a common sense of belonging.

# Therefore, at the moment when Europe is reflecting on its future, it is fundamental to generate more effective policies and a new positive narrative. This must be based on common values, social justice and on a long-term vision and strategy of socially, politically and economically sustainable development for a Europe which is respected globally and which can reconnect citizens with the European project.

# Taking pride in our past achievements but also recognising our share of responsibility in addressing the challenges ahead, the European Economic and Social Committee, 60 years after its foundation, proposes **five priorities** which we believe are crucial for a stronger and more inclusive European Union:

1. **A Union of values**: We need to reinforce the values of human dignity, freedom, equality, democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights, as enshrined in Article 2 TEU. At a time when these founding European values are often called into question, we must, through our words and actions, reaffirm that they are essential and non-negotiable. These values ensure peace, justice, non-discrimination and diversity as a guarantee of an open society and define both who we are today and who we want to be tomorrow. Above all we must make the Union a human one once more, where people are placed at the centre of all its actions. It is time to show active commitment to strengthen democracy.
2. **Investment for a solid and shared growth**: we must ensure a smooth transition to a society that is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms. In particular, this can be achieved by implementing a smart, sustainable and innovative industrial policy, based on a strong, fair and indivisible Single Market supported by adequate investments, as well as state of the art technical and environmental developments. We will continue to support European businesses and workers by reinforcing current successful economic and social models, whilst developing new fair and sustainable ones. We must also rise to the challenges posed by climate change and the depletion of the earth’s natural resources to enterprise, employment and society at large. Within this context the Paris Agreement is a historic step forward. Action has already started to take place in this regard but much more needs to be achieved within a much shorter span of time.
3. **Reinforcement of the European social model**: we need a Europe capable of protecting, and caring for all of its citizens, also those who are excluded from or are unable to participate in the labour market. The effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is a first step in this direction and is essential when it comes to guaranteeing social inclusion, social investment and social innovation. While anticipating the impact of digitalisation and climate change, we need to strengthen our systems of social protection, collective bargaining and guaranteed workers' rights, as well as quality employment, fair working conditions and decent income for all, as well as consumers` rights protection. At the same time, we need a smart approach to developing the appropriate skills for the workplace of today and for the new jobs being created. In this regard, support for these transitions and life-long learning is essential. It is also crucial for Europe that the spirit of entrepreneurship, including social economy, is rekindled. Labour market transformations must generate new, decent employment, help reduce poverty including in-work poverty, and preserve and reinforce social dialogue and workers involvement and participation.
4. **A new European narrative:** we believe that it is imperative to support a common sense of belonging and purpose among European citizens. We thus need not only more effective EU policies but also a new positive European narrative, which can reconnect citizens with the European project, whilst restoring people’s trust in politics, strengthening cohesion and countering isolationist and nationalistic as well as populistic tendencies. The foundation for this endeavour lies in culture, education, driving creativity, openness, solidarity and intercultural exchange. Especially we need to create the right environment for the young generation to regain its trust in European society.
5. **A stronger and more structured dialogue with citizens**: a better link between the European Union and its citizens is of vital importance. The European Union must once more become people-centred, enabling its citizens to achieve a better quality of life. Through our members, who are representatives of civil society organisations in their respective Member States, facing the same everyday challenges of any European citizen, the EESC has played an active role in this regard during the past 60 years. Today we renew our commitment to work with all EU Institutions and European leaders to make the most of this key link with the wider European society and of the considerable experience and knowledge found within the EESC. We are confident that together we can overcome the tide of destructive populism and xenophobia. Besides new forms of consulting citizens, we should not forget the need for a proper civil dialogue and support of public participation. Strengthening them is currently more important than ever.

# At the moment of its 60th anniversary, proud of its past and confident about the future, the European Economic and Social Committee stands ready to deliver on its role and responsibilities. As a place of debate and dialogue, representing the economic and social diversity of European societies, we can offer valuable responses to the EU's economic, social and institutional challenges. We will pursue this path with strong commitment, inspired by that same common sense of purpose expressed by the conviction of our founders.

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