



We are ready for the next 60 years. This is not a threat. It is a promise.

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Speaker

Commemorative Speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the European Economic and Social Committee [Check against delivery]

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Thank you for joining us here today to celebrate the 60th anniversary of this 'House of Civil Society' I have the honour to preside.

Sixty years ago, the first Commission President Walter Hallstein declared at our inaugural session: *"The ESC is more than a simple group of experts (...) through the Economic and Social Committee, the Commission (...) will know what factory managers, farmers, workers and professionals are thinking (...) you are the spokespersons for European public opinion on economics. You will share the experience, technical views and concerns of population of the six countries of the Common Market with the Commission"*.

Today, the European Economic and Social Committee represents 'Europe at Work', in all fields of civic, social and economic life. It was established at the very beginning with a parliamentary physiognomy, assembled by professional groups and not by nationalities, thus realising the aspiration of the 1948 Hague Congress to create a consultative body made up of employers, workers and public interest representatives, supporting the governmental bodies in the development of the European project.

Anniversaries are a time for celebration. For togetherness and joy.

A moment to pause, to look back and take stock of achievements which will drive our future. The EESC has much to be proud of.

Slightly over a year after the Treaty of Rome, the first ESC held its Plenary Assembly on May 19th, 1958 in the hemicycle of the Belgian senate.

If we had been in Brussels on that day, we would have met people on their way to the Brussels' World Fair. It was the first major World Exposition after World War II. Faith in both human and scientific progress was great. The Atomium, this astounding piece of architecture, embodies this perfectly. CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research had been launched a few years earlier. The first earth Satellite Sputnik was launched. Science held the potential for a better present and future which could be shaped by humankind. The decolonisation of many African nations had begun, bringing the hope of autonomy to many countries and opening the floor for a new era of partnership between Europe and Africa.

In this *'état d'esprit'*, the 'ESC' was founded. It was driven by a generation, which had experienced the horrors of war and seen how fascist governments had suppressed the independent voices of civil society.

They had experienced the darkness of human nature - and *because* of this - believed that civil society should constitute a fourth power, with the existing institutions. They dared to imagine a positive present and future.

As Seneca stated: *"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult."*

The EESC represents the very spirit of our European democracies. It is an intermediary force, carrying Europe back into local and national environments and representing their needs and hopes.

It is a house of debate, consultation and compromise. Our members are not paid for the work they do for the EESC, they volunteer on top of their duties as farmers, unionists, business representatives, leaders of Civil Society Organisations and much more. With more than 2000 meetings annually, many of them in Member States or outside the EU, feeding into an average of 200 opinions per year, we contribute to strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

The expansion of the EESC's consultative power developed through:

- the right of initiative introduced by the 1972 Paris Summit;
- the substantial autonomy provided by the Maastricht Treaty;
- the increasing list of subjects on which we are consulted;
- the growing demands of exploratory opinions “en amont” of legislative processes;
- and finally the official recognition as a privileged representative of organised civil society in the 2004 European Constitutional Treaty process.

However, even if we are aware of this key role, we are often too focused on our current business to feel the magnitude of our achievements.

Hannah Arendt, whose book 'The Human Condition' was also published in 1958, wrote: “What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”

So, let me remind us of only a few remarkable examples of the EESC's work.

- The EESC was behind the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers in 1989, which then became part of European legislation. And last year we were, together with national ECS, a leading partner in the debate in all 28 Member States for the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- Our long-term work in the field of migration and refugees resulted in the establishment in 2009 of the Integration Forum, now the European Migration Forum, which has been one of the most appreciated platforms of permanent dialogue between civil society and the institutions.
- The EESC's ACP-EU dialogue with non-state actors, in accordance with the mandate of the Cotonou Agreement, has been a flagship for the long-term.
- We have also successfully accompanied the enlargement process with structured preparatory dialogues with civil society representations of the candidate countries. We are now doing the same in the Western Balkans.
- We were among those leading the successful call for integrating sustainability elements in trade agreements and for giving civil society a role in the monitoring process. We are now involved in several Domestic Advisory Bodies.
- We pioneered suggestions on the Financial Transaction Tax, Social Economy and social enterprises, food waste, programmed obsolescence, industrial transformation and artificial intelligence, new models of functional, cooperative and circular economy, latter leading to the recent creation of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, a unique instrument for structured dialogue in the EU.
- And on institutional level, we should definitely remember what has been the largest institutional achievement of the EESC in the past 20 years: the full recognition of the constitutional role of civil dialogue and participatory democracy, with Article 11 of the Treaty, something unique in the world. It was in particular a result of the strong initiative of President Susanne Tiemann in 1993, pursued by her successors and mainly by two other Presidents, Beatrice Rangoni Macchiavelli and Annemarie Sigmund. Perhaps it is not just by accident that such an extraordinary innovation was due to 3 of the 4 female Presidents in the EESC's history.

We take our role in the implementation of article 11 seriously, and constantly strive to develop space for larger structured dialogue, as through

- the Civil Society Liaison Group;
- strong support of the European Citizens Initiative;
- 28 national debates on the Future of Europe, around the five scenarios proposed by President Juncker;
- and very recently our active cooperation in the “Citizens’ consultations” proposed by the French President Emmanuel Macron.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our achievements are the foundation for the future of a strong EESC- and thus a strong EU. We must not rest comfortably on our laurels. Because we can only be true to ourselves if we try our very best to fulfil the duty inherited from our founders: to be the voice of organised civil society and to assist EU institutions in their crucial work.

Using the unique strength we have through our direct links with organised civil society throughout Europe, we will work for a sustainable future.

The percentage of populist votes is constantly rising across Europe. There are citizens, amongst which also many young people, for whom the future holds no hope and who struggle with unemployment or unsustainable living and working conditions.

There are countries in Europe and in our neighbourhood on the brink of war. Let us show we have not forgotten the lessons from the past. We should not take peace and tolerance for granted.

There are countries that are infringing on the rights of civil society to meet and organise themselves politically. Let us defend civic space.

Therefore, we must increase our efforts to preserve and secure our main achievements in terms of rights, values, liberties, democracy and the rule of law. We must be capable to resist the terrible temptation offered by “souverainistes”, which offer poor and dangerous answers to very crucial questions posed by our fellow citizens, workers, enterprises and communities.

Not to mention the challenges posed by environmental and technological changes, which cannot be tackled if we do not work united together.

Our actions must be decisive and visionary. Let us be inspired by the spirit of '58, and create a new narrative of hope. Let us drive a second European renaissance together, in which we once again trust that we are indeed the protagonists of our present and future.

We have always stressed that the Declaration of Rome in March 2017 was and continues to be the appropriate roadmap for delivering the needed results towards the end of this European mandate.

Let me highlight seven crucial points that are already clear priorities of our Economic and Social Committee for the years to come.

1) We need to reinforce a Union of Values: democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights, human dignity and freedom are non-negotiable. In this moment in time when our founding values are questioned, we will need to stand strong together to guarantee our open societies which define who we are and who we want to be tomorrow.

2) We will continue to advocate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda on European level and beyond, transitioning to a society that is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms. The EESC has authored many innovative opinions in this field. Let us strive for their implementation. Europe must be sustainable- or it will not be at all. The Agenda 2030 is a comprehensive strategy. It is a real political project for European citizens.

3) An interlinked European Union calls for increased coordination of economic policy. Let us ensure that the European Semester rises to its potential to propose sound public finances, structural reforms towards jobs and growth and investment. Only in a strong economic space can the foundations of social, environmental and cultural sustainability be laid.

4) We will have a very proactive stance on the challenges and potential of Artificial Intelligence, which needs to serve humankind rather than perpetuate the biases of the human minds which developed it. It needs to be a tool to craft our futures rather than a yoke of surveillance.

5) We are in the midst of debates on the Multiannual Financial Framework proposal put forward by the Commission. It is a framework for future of our sustainable societies for the 500 million citizens of Europe. It has to capture the ambition and commitment of the European Union in the lead-up to the European elections in May 2019. We must work for a stronger vision of solidarity and cohesion and a more daring budget.

6) In order to adapt to our changing realities, we need to drive a new European narrative through culture and education, driving artistic creation, intercultural mobility and exchange, and enhancing a sense of belonging and purpose. We need to provide all citizens with an understanding of our heritage, empowering us to look constructively and without fear in a shared direction.

7) Last but not least, we must resist navel gazing and actively shape our relations with the ever-changing world around us, in our neighbourhood and beyond.

We need to strengthen forces striving for peace in the Western Balkans. We must help drive initiatives in our Mediterranean neighbourhood and the Middle East to consolidate democracy, reengage and stabilise peace processes and support civil society in countries struggling to cope with migratory flows. At the same time, we have to defend and promote EU *acquis* in the field of trade agreements.

And for all this, we need the voice of our youth.

We need their help to overcome a certain ossification of thought. We need their support to rebel against the learned conformity of our behaviour, which makes us, despite all our efforts, produce the same results, over and over again. The European Union needs young, creative, constructive rebellion.

The next year is crucial.

The electoral period must not prevent us from underlining the necessity to drive forward crucial dossiers such as I have mentioned before.

We must reinforce the debate on the Future of Europe in every way possible in our countries and constituencies, inciting an informed vote and high electoral turnout.

'Europe at work' is the lever, the catalyst and powerhouse for this *rEUnaissance*.

Perhaps we can for example provide a framework for civil society dialogue with the Spitzenkandidaten through the EESC.

Our dialogue with civil society will certainly constitute a crucial element of the success of the Sibiu Summit on the Future of Europe on 9 May 2019.

Regrettably, the Summit will only be attended by 27 Heads of State, a gathering without the participation of the European nation of Great Britain. We must ensure that civil society links remain strong to drive joint endeavours and support citizens in this divorce process and enable a joint future.

For sure, this is not a time for business as usual.

Never before since the 1930s has the dark fire of populism flared up so threateningly.

As Federica Mogherini rightly said at the State of the Union in Florence: *"It seems that screaming, shouting, insulting and bullying, systematically destroying and dismantling everything that is already in place, is the mood of our time. While the secret of change – and we need change – is to put all energies not in destroying the old, but rather in building the new. Today's impulse to destroy is not leading us anywhere good, it is not solving any of our problems"*.

We know, you know that this rings dramatically true at any level.

I am not so naive to believe that we, in the EESC, are exonerated from this destructive energy. Sometimes, this devastating mood of our time also enters our debates and dynamics. But because of our belonging to the concrete everyday challenges in the social and economic life of our countries, we are capable of working together for shared solutions. Sixty years after the birth of our institution we are still committed to this fundamental mission: to be a space where civil dialogue is a way of producing our future.

We are 60 years old. Perhaps this is visible in a certain number of internal procedures that we must modernise to respond to the speed of change we are confronted with. We are also experiencing an exorbitant proliferation of online consultations. The mirage of a so-called digital participatory democracy is increasingly popular amongst numerous decision-makers, who seem to blindly follow the erroneous belief that clicks and likes, online questionnaires, chats and the shift to digital in all domains constitutes a form of future post-modern democracy.

We remain convinced that true civil dialogue needs this House of Civil Society, the structured space of the European Economic and Social Committee. A structure which certainly also draws upon new technologies, but where listening and debate, patient search for converging opinions remains the constructive way of making our democracy thrive. Simply because this best allows us to understand, exchange and discover innovative ideas.

Therefore, the history of our House of European Civil Society is still a beautiful story in the making.

We participate, often in a new and anticipatory manner, in the difficult but passionate construction of this democratic power of civil dialogue. We are the institutional dimension of this dialogue, which becomes a source of normative production and action.

We are here to dare the future of Europe.

For, as Soren Kierkegaard wrote: *"To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself."*

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