

# EU-China Civil Society Round Table “Trade between us needs not only to be free but also to be fair”

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Speaker

*Opening Speech delivered at EU-China Civil Society Round Table [Check against delivery]*

Your excellency,  
Honorable Vice-President Yang Chonghui,  
Dear Members of the China Economic and Social Council,  
Dear Members of the European Economic and Social Committee,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all here this morning. I would like to express my warm welcome in particular to all the members of the China Economic and Social Council delegation, for convening such a distinguished group of delegates from various fields of research and policy in China.

I have recently taken over the Presidency of the EESC from Mr Georges Dassis, whom you have met on the two previous occasions we met, in 2016 and 2017, in Brussels and Beijing respectively. I may not have been able to join you on those occasions, but I happen to have been a member of the EESC for over 15 years and have been a member of the EESC's delegation to the EU-China Round Table before.

The EESC renewal in April resulted in some new members being added to the delegation on the EU side, too. The same goes for the China ESC delegation that we welcome here today. I know that a few members of the present EESC delegation were members before: Mr Peel, Mr Clever, Mr Gavrilovs. This mix of experienced and new members is important for our meetings: ensuring continuity helps us to build on results from the past, while new members bring new ideas and dynamics to our meetings.

Whether new or experienced, you will all be aware that last year, we celebrated the fact that the EU-China Round Table had completed its first decade. In these 10 years, the EU-China Round Table has firmly established itself as one of the key bilateral events between the EU and China, which reflects the overall positive state and stability of those relations. This 16th edition of the Round Table will hopefully serve not only to reconfirm the established, firmly rooted relations between our institutions, but also serve as a step forwards into the future.

As major economic, political and strategic partners in a globalising world that faces constant and unpredictable change, the EU and China must continue to work together on an ever increasing number of issues, including new areas that we will address during this Round Table meeting: social security, social solidarity mechanisms, and if possible – and this is of particular interest to the EESC delegation – exploring possibilities to coordinate policies in this very important area for workers and for businesses alike.

The EU and China share common views in many areas. The ever-increasing interdependence in this globally connected world that I just mentioned will put demands on us in terms of closer cooperation to face common challenges. Especially in the area of trade and investment, firstly, we must ensure that growth is sustainable, inclusive, and benefits all. We must take measures to make sure we operate sound and stable financial systems, and commonly and strongly continue to defend the multilateral, open and rules-based trading system we have so carefully built over the last 50 or more years. In this context, the EU's and China's active and constructive engagement is paramount to ensuring that the WTO remains the core of the open trading system.

The economy – and our trade relations – lie at the heart of EU-China relations. Reciprocity, market access and a level playing field are increasingly important in the context of our bilateral relationship and – once in place – will allow us to explore new opportunities in the context of globalisation. Trade between us needs not only to be free, but also to be fair.

Secondly, apart from the financial and economic aspects, we need to also look at finding common ground in other areas of international cooperation, wherever we can, and cooperate constructively together as partners to strengthen that work – in particular on questions that will come up in our discussions today and tomorrow: social security and social solidarity mechanisms. These and other issues – such as environmental sustainability, human, economic and social rights, access to education and health, and culture – have a strong impact on furthering people's well-being, which is the ultimate, underlying foundation of any form of international cooperation.

Thirdly, an alignment between China and the European Union concerning international solutions is nowhere more important than in leading the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. There are clear interlinkages between both the Belt & Road Initiative and the future Euro-Asian Connectivity Strategy, and the wider global commitments to sustainability as reflected in the Paris agreement. If executed in the right

way, more investment in public infrastructure links between us would unleash growth potential with benefits for all.

Ladies and gentlemen, upon taking the helm as the EESC's new President, I have reconfirmed my deep faith in the values of European integration and in the role played by organised civil society and our own institution. My presidency will concentrate on sustainable development, the promotion of peace, strengthening the role of culture and giving young Europeans a voice.

It goes without saying that these values and priorities will also apply to our role – as civil societies – in promoting international cooperation. I hope we will be able to do so in the next 2 days, by setting an example of fruitful, respectful and constructive cooperation, even in areas where we might not always agree.

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.

EU and China should take the higher ground and try to mend differences to build a stronger future for the young generations on both continents.

Thank you very much for your attention, and I wish us all very good and fruitful discussions.