

# What Europe do we want?

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Speaker

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on "What Europe do we want?" [Check against delivery]*

Distinguished President Dulevski,

Ms Pavlova,

Honourable Councillors,

Dear Colleagues,

It's an honour for me to be here with you today to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria and the 60th anniversary of the European Economic and Social Committee.

For the past 15 years the cooperation between our organisations has been exemplary. The work of the EESC would not be possible without reliable partners such as the ESC of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Let me mention the work in the Europe 2020 Steering Committee or your strong involvement in the network of the national ESCs of the EU and the EESC and its annual meetings.

Today, our partnership is needed more than ever.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe is not in good shape. Pope Francis, two years ago, challenged us, "What happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, of democracy and freedom?"

Europe, but also the world, is regressing into self-withdrawal, simple speeches, without nuances: nationalism is spreading, solidarities are eroding; reason, humanism, and even science and progress, are being called into question. In this context, Europe, its institutions, civil society seem to be derisory ramparts.

We have to pull ourselves together. We cannot rest on our laurels. The European Union has achieved a lot in the past 60 years, during which we preserved peace and prosperity.

Most Member States are currently living through the longest period of uninterrupted economic growth.

The EESC was at the forefront in delivering growth, jobs and prosperity over these last 60 years: We were behind the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of workers that is part of European legislation since 1989.

Last year we organised debates in all 28 Member States for the European Pillar of Social Rights. Once again, the national ESCs were indispensable partners in this process.

In 2009, we established the Integration Forum. This forum has proven to be among the most useful platforms of permanent dialogue between civil society and the European institutions.

We have been successful in the area of trade policy where we managed to integrate a focus on sustainability and on a privileged role for civil society in the monitoring process.

We have been active on the Financial Transaction Tax, on social economy, on food waste, industrial transformation and artificial intelligence as well as on circular economy, where we contributed to the creation of the European Circular Economy Platform.

We were instrumental in having Article 11 in the Treaty on European Union. This Article fully recognises the constitutional role of civil dialogue and participatory democracy. Today, it is in this context that we played an active role in the Citizens' Consultations proposed by the French President Emmanuel Macron.

The list goes on. But despite all these achievements Europe seems to have lost its compass for the future as it goes through a period of divisive uncertainty, both internally and externally.

It would be foolhardy and deeply unfair not to listen to and react constructively to the warning signals, such as the continuously high levels of poverty touching 24% of Europeans; the widening inequalities between and inside EU Member States; the low levels of trust in democratic institutions; the unresolved migration crisis that could disrupt European unity; the still incomplete and fragile economic and monetary union.

A crucial step is before us: the European elections of May 2019. We must propose a mobilizing European project that will even make you dream!

When I was appointed as President of the European EESC last spring, I called for a re-birth, for an authentic rEUnaissance of the European project. This was based on a number of observations:

First element of this observation: the fourth industrial revolution, which started about twenty years ago, has been much swifter than the previous ones, and at least as significant.

The economic crisis of 2018 has been a catalyst for economic, social and geopolitical disruption.

We are in the process of discovering its consequences, in particular the political ones: rejection of the elites in favour of the people, rejection of the moderates to the benefit of extremists with simple solutions for a complicated world, rejection of "experts" in favour of a vague obscurantism which calls into question knowledge, science and progress.

Second element of the observation: the environmental crisis has become an existential threat, not for the planet, because contrary to what is said, the planet will continue to exist. But new geological equilibriums will put the Human race at risk. On October 8th, the IPCC report was made public: the CO2 level has never been higher, and we are forgetting the objectives of the Paris agreement.

Third element of the observation: the social model, the labor market, the distribution of roles between the social actors, the citizens and the politicians have been shaken by the digital economy.

This societal storm has political consequences: "illiberalism" and the reduction of democratic spaces; the questioning and decomposition of international organizations. According to the Brazilian President, the UN is a "leftist landmark". Meanwhile Mr Trump believes that the World Trade Organization is a "threat to the sovereignty of the American people". In fact, these organizations are only trying to appease and regulate the fury of the world.

In response to these challenges, I decided to focus on three priorities to re-energise Europe and the European project and launch a true rEUnaissance, which I believe is essential to lead the fight of the elections of May 2019.

First priority: make a firm commitment to a sustainable development. Now more than ever, we should tell citizens the truth that a Sustainable Europe is possible with the implementation of the Agenda 2030. Europe must be sustainable - or it will not be at all as it will risk to crashed by international giants.

Second priority: peace. At a time when the United States is questioning the international treaties on nuclear weapons (the Iran Agreement, the 1987 Medium Weapons Treaty), we have to emphasize again and again the message of what constitutes the greatest success of the European construction: Peace.

Third priority: culture. The richness of our national histories, our cultures (we are "united in diversity", the motto of Europe), the social model we have created, the permanent search for compromise that is in our DNA, all this is creating a framework, that helps to bring solutions to our immense challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living historic and, yet, challenging times.

Several strategic issues demand action from us: the negotiations on the EU budget after 2020; Brexit which is only 5 months away and of course the European elections of May 2019.

As President of the EESC, I know that we will need to be vocal in the months to come. We will need to fight for our beliefs and values, democracy and human dignity: we owe it to ourselves and our children.

I know that the civil society will be up to the task. These elections are not only about "ThisTimeImVoting (the slogan of the campaign), but also This time I am acting.

We should not be scared: Let's just get ready for the way ahead!

Europe is still the best place to live and work, to found a company or a family, to access health and education. Europe is the greatest gift that we can give a newborn today.

Thank you for your attention.