The Grassroots View - Episode 3: Getting tough on gender violence

Home is the least safe place for every third woman in the EU. Every day, some 12 European women die as victims of gender-based violence. Although the rates may be higher in some parts of Europe than in others, women are safe in none.

Our guest is Croatian actress and screenwriter, Jelena Veljača, who, enraged by a gruesome act of domestic violence that shook the country, last year wrote an angry Facebook post with a hashtag "#spasime" ("save me") which snowballed into a national cry for justice for women and girls. The #spasime movement has become a vivid example of the power of civil society to bring about changes and to push lawmakers to act. Croatian EESC member Marina Škrabalo, tells us about the importance of the Istanbul Convention and the EESC's take on the matter, while VoxEurop editor-in-chief Catherine André talks about the absence of unanimous support for the Convention despite the chilling statistics. (ll)

Available Languages:
bg cs da de el en es et fi fr ga hr hu it lv mt nl pl pt ro sk sl sv

Editorial

Dear Readers,

A number of events have taken place at the start of this year that will influence the future of the European Union.

BREXIT

On 22 January, our British colleagues took part in their final plenary session before their departure. It was clear from the work they have carried out within the Committee and the ceremony held that day just how painful and difficult that departure was. But one remark made that day has stayed with us: "It's not goodbye, it's au revoir."

I would like to think that we will maintain close ties because civil society knows no borders.

We shook hands with all the members of the delegation - a very emotional moment, with tears shed and recollections shared of our time together. For many of the EESC's British members, this was the end of a journey. From 1 February, they will have to learn to live without us and we without them. I'm sure that our memories won't let us down and that we will never forget working with our British colleagues over the years.

It's now up to us to build a good solid bridge and strengthen ties with the British people.

This separation shows how important it is to find another kind of relationship and way of living together after 31 January. So there are a number of tasks awaiting us in the EESC: stepping up communications, building closer synergies and launching more joint projects.

Conference on the Future of Europe

It was partly in response to Brexit that the idea of a Conference on the Future of Europe - to be launched on 9 May 2020 - came into being. The conference will run for two years and will coordinate the debate on how the EU works.

On 15 January, the European Parliament adopted a resolution outlining a framework for the project and on 22 January, the European Commission published a communication on the subject.
I believe that the Conference on the Future of Europe should be used to address the main policy areas where the EU can take action, by discussing these issues with the public and all other stakeholders, such as national parliaments, the EESC, other civil society organisations and so on. As members of the EESC, we are aware of the challenges posed by this very complex undertaking. However, we firmly believe that it can only succeed if the voice of organised civil society is heard.

Furthermore, data from the Commission’s standard Eurobarometer survey from November 2019 show that 83% of respondents wanted the public’s views to be taken into account more at all levels (national, regional and local) in decisions affecting the future of Europe.

Robert Schuman Declaration

The conference will be launched on the anniversary of the Robert Schuman Declaration. It will mark 70 years of peace in Europe, of building up closer integration, of joint projects, European values and fundamental rights. We will advocate the need for an open, inclusive and fair Europe. We are aware that the EU is not perfect. It has reached a turning point and is looking at itself critically. In this regard, it is again focusing its attention increasingly on civil society and the key role it can play in strengthening ties with the public.

The EU needs us, and civil society organisations, more than ever, as we have on-the-ground knowledge of areas outside Brussels, of their concerns and their day-to-day life. It will be a real challenge to pool all our forces and create a partnership between all the institutions so that we can successfully conclude the Conference during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in two years’ time.

So this is our task for 2020: to get going, alongside all the other institutions, and head towards the future. Because this the moment where the hard work really begins for the EU.

Isabel Caño Aguilar
Vice-President for Communication

Diary Dates

25 February 2020, Brussels

2020 ECI Day: Today and Beyond

18-19 March 2020, Brussels

EESC plenary session

19-20 March 2020, Brussels

2020 Your Europe, Your Say!

New publications

Civil Society Media Seminar 2019 - report out now

The findings of the EESC’s 13th Civil Society Media Seminar - The EU is (for) you - The role of civil society in communicating the European Union - are now available online for interested readers.

A report showcasing the main conclusions and highlights of the three panels has been made available online to readers who missed out on the Civil Society Media Seminar 2019 or wish to share in its insights. The report can be downloaded from the EESC’s website at: https://bit.ly/2TpN5X

Has Europe’s loss of lustre over the last decade or so been a matter of policy, communication or both? What should an inspiring narrative for 21st-century Europe look like? What role has the media played in tarnishing the EU's image? What progress are we making towards a public conversation that goes beyond national borders? Can quality journalism today overcome some of the hurdles that have so far kept public debate within the confines of individual countries?

These are some of the key issues that were raised and passionately debated at the seminar.

Eight key findings have been distilled from the wealth of insights, ideas and proposals that were voiced in the panels. We hope they will grab the attention of the new generation of leaders that have recently taken up the reins of the EU.

The 13th Civil Society Media Seminar was held at the University of Malaga on 10-11 October 2019. It involved some 150 participants including civil society representatives, academia,
The EESC gave the floor to the "End the Cage Age" European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) at its plenary, held in Brussels, providing a European level platform to express its goals and concerns about the welfare of farming animals.

EESC vice-president Isabel Caño welcomed Olga Kikou, coordinator of the initiative, congratulating her on the successful ECI: it had gathered more than 1.5 million signatures across 21 European Member States within one year and was now undergoing the Member States' certification procedure.

Compassion in world farming, the organisation behind the ECI campaign, was established back in 1865 by Peter Roberts, a British dairy farmer who was worried about modern farming methods. Animals were able to suffer and feel pain, and they could enjoy the company of others and have feelings of joy and negative feelings too; this demonstrated that they were sentient beings, said Ms Kikou, underlining that the Lisbon Treaty recognised animals as such.

"We want to make sure that the European institutions will act upon citizens' expectations," said Ms Kikou. "We are working together with farmers to teach them sustainable farming. We are not against them, we are not for banning meat; it is just that cages don't..."
belong in the 21st century."

Christophe Lefèvre, president of the ECI group at the EESC, took the opportunity to reaffirm the EESC’s continuing commitment to improving the ECI instrument – something that emerged in a very practical way at the annual ECI day. The goal was to make it more user-friendly and ensure that it had a genuine impact.

EESC members commented that, in the interests of both consumers and farmers and of sustainable farming, all aspects – such as meat imports and the financial impact on the single market – had to be carefully examined before any further action was taken.

Green future: Europe has to show the way and lead by example

The fight against climate change was high on the agenda of the EESC's January plenary session, which hosted a debate on COP25 and the European Green Deal and sent out a clear message: urgent measures need to be taken to make climate protection and sustainable development a reality, and the European Union must take the lead.

EESC president Luca Jahier was crystal clear in his words: "We are at a critical moment in time. Unfortunately, the world is not on track to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement on climate change or the SDG targets and this could have devastating implications for all of us. At the EESC we are convinced that implementing the 2030 Agenda must be the EU's top priority for the next decade. Europe must be the frontrunner - the global leader on climate!"

Mr Jahier deplored the lack of political will amongst the countries attending Madrid’s COP25 as regards stepping up climate efforts; this had led to a mediocre outcome at the international climate summit. However, he praised European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s Communication on the European Green Deal and its firm commitment to climate neutrality by 2050.

In this respect, Virginijus Sinkevičius, Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, pointed out that the Green Deal was not only a way of tackling the climate change problem, but also the expression of an ambition to ensure economic growth and social justice. "It is about people and society, it is a Green Deal which leaves nobody behind"; he declared, stressing that the Biodiversity Strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan and other systematic solutions for delivering climate change aims would cater for both people and the planet, pulling together all sectors and actors.

We need a wellbeing economy that works for people and the planet

The EU is under pressure to respond to multifaceted challenges arising from a decade of economic disruption, the migration crisis, social discontent and environmental degradation. As the EESC states in an opinion adopted in January, it needs to reinvent itself fast for the sake of its people.

This EESC opinion seeks to define what the sustainable economy we need should look like, exploring a new vision of prosperity for people and the planet which brings together the economic, environmental and social dimensions. It also calls for new economic models, investment decisions to harness technological advances and new indicators for the wellbeing economy.

With the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and with the European Green Deal, the EU has finally made these issues its top priorities. However, this Green Deal needs to become a real Green and Social Deal.

"To ensure a fair and green transition and the implementation of the SDGs, we have to re-think our EU economy. We have to reboot the system, but we need new software, not just an update!" said rapporteur Peter Schmidt.

The nations of the world have committed themselves to an Agenda for 2030 that is radical, fair and achievable. The EU has also adopted the Green Deal and is committed to making progress towards the SDGs. This offers a unique opportunity for the EU to renew its vision of social progress, revitalise its economy and lead more effectively across the world by example.

EESC visits Japan to discuss trade and sustainable development

Members of the EU-Japan Follow-up Committee of the EESC visited Japan between 27 and 31 January to discuss the implementation of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), in place since February 2019, and to strengthen cooperation with Japanese counterparts. The visit also included the first Joint Dialogue with Civil Society, with an exchange of views on trade and sustainable development issues.

The main purpose of the mission was to build on the positive cooperation with Japanese civil society organisations and institutions since the establishment of the EPA. EESC members outlined the need for legal reforms in Japan in order to apply fundamental ILO conventions. They also tried to raise awareness on climate change among their local counterparts, as this topic still has a low profile in Japan.

News from the Groups
The Employers' Group has elected its candidates for key EESC posts for 2020-2022

By the EESC Employers’ Group

The Employers’ Group has elected Jacek Krawczyk – the current Group President – as their candidate for the next EESC presidency. Stefano Mallia has been elected as the group’s next president. The group’s members have also elected their candidates for a number of other key positions in the next EESC term of office.

Mr Krawczyk received 66 out of the 95 votes cast. The other candidate, Goncalo Lobo Xavier, got 21 votes, with 8 votes left blank. Jacek Krawczyk has been the president of the Employers' Group since 2013. He is vice-president of Confederation Lewiatan, the largest organisation of private sector employers in Poland. He has previously held the position of CEO for several banks and companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange and has chaired the supervisory boards of companies from various branches of the economy. He was also involved in Poland's transition to a free market economy, serving as Secretary of State in the Ministry for Industry and Trade.

Stefano Mallia was elected as the next President of the Employers’ Group. He has been an EESC member since 2010 and is currently vice-president of the Employers’ Group and chair of the EESC's Brexit Follow-up Group. Mr Mallia is a partner at EMCS ltd. and an expert in EU affairs, specialising in EU Structural Funds and SME financing. Over the years, he has carried out assignments for the European Commission and the Government of Malta, as well as for private enterprises.

The Group's members have also selected their candidates for a number of other senior EESC posts: Milena Angelova for the role of quaestor (in charge of overseeing the implementation of rules concerning members' rights and duties); Dimitris Dimitriadi for the position of president of the Section for External Relations, Christa Schweng for the role of president of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, and Pietro Francesco De Lotto for the position of president of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change.

The candidates will take up their posts – after being confirmed by the assembly – in October 2020, when the EESC starts its next term of office. In March, the Group will hold the second wave of elections, proposing its candidates for section vice-presidents, and presidents and vice-presidents of observatories, follow-up committees and advisory groups. (lj)

Workers' Group to discuss migration, human rights and the role of trade unions in Sicily

By the EESC Workers’ Group

On 27 February, the Workers’ Group will be travelling to Sicily, one of the major arrival points for migrants and refugees in Italy, to listen to their stories and discuss with local and regional players, trade unionists and civil society members the most pressing issues and challenges facing them.

Applications for international protection have continued to increase in the last two years, with around 587,000 asylum claims made in the EU, after the peak of 1.3 million applicants in 2015 and subsequent drop. Moreover, figures, stories and pictures of thousands of dead migrants and asylum seekers in the Mediterranean waters are still fresh in the memory.

For those who arrive and file an application, around a third are approved, but the ordeal rarely stops there. Both migrants and refugees are confronted by complicated procedures for labour market access, housing shortages, and adaptation and integration problems. Added to this, exploitation at work is common for undocumented migrants. Racism and xenophobia have increased in recent years, promoted by the far right but tolerated with varying degrees of willingness by a much broader spectrum of political parties. Meanwhile, the European Commission has announced a New Pact on Migration and Asylum that will reform the Common European Asylum Policy.

Organised civil society and trade unions are tackling this challenge, particularly near the so-called arrival ‘hotspots’ at the EU’s southern and eastern borders. For this reason, the Workers’ Group will travel to Sicily, one of the major arrival points in Italy, to discuss with local and regional players, trade unionists and civil society members the most pressing issues and challenges, in terms of fundamental rights and integration, but also labour exploitation, mafia involvement and other illegal practices.

For more information on the event, see: https://bit.ly/2H3zgug (prp/mg)

Soon in the EESC/Cultural events

Stasys Eidrigevičius’s small pieces of happiness at the EESC

The EESC is currently hosting an exhibition of works by renowned Lithuanian artist Stasys Eidrigevičius, whose award-winning art spans painting, drawing, book illustration, poster designing, happenings and installations.

The exhibition, entitled A collection of small pieces of happiness, has been organised in cooperation with the Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the EU and with the support of the Lithuanian Art Museum, Lithuania's Modern Art Museum and the Lithuanian Culture Institute.

The artist attended the official opening on 5 February 2020, together with EESC President Luca Jahier and H.E. Ms Jovita Neliupšienė, Lithuania’s Permanent Representative to the EU. The exhibition will be on display at the EESC until 28 February.

Practical info at: https://bit.ly/2ulbp0u (ck)
The International Labour Organization: 100 years of social protection

As the ILO celebrates its centenary, the EESC is hosting an exhibition which traces the organisation’s history and work. Entitled *100 years of Social Protection with the International Labour Organization*, it will be on display in the EESC’s premises throughout February.

The exhibition, which features 24 roll-up banners in English and French, illustrates the establishment and evolution of social protection systems around the world since the ILO’s creation in 1919.

A launch event is scheduled for Wednesday, 19 February, when the EESC’s plenary session will be hosting a debate with ILO Director-General Guy Ryder.

Organised with the support of all three EESC Groups (Employers, Workers and Diversity Europe), the exhibition has already been on show at the Court of Justice of the EU in Luxembourg, in Antwerp and in various Universities.

Practical info at: [https://bit.ly/2S0Ka9w](https://bit.ly/2S0Ka9w) (ck)