



Europe must become a global leader in sustainable development

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Speaker

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President of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here with you today at this Council, an institution with which the European Economic and Social Committee has a very close and special relationship.

The president, Patrick Bernasconi, participated in the discussion on the future of Europe during our plenary session in Brussels on 21 March. I am therefore delighted to be able to take part, in return, in the same discussion at your plenary assembly today.

First and foremost I would like to point out how strong, valued and necessary cooperation between our two committees is. We have many things in common, and I would like to highlight, 42 days before the European elections, how much the French ESEC and the EESC are fighting with the same dedication to defend the European project.

The process of making decisions on the future of Europe will be clarified during the informal summit of heads of state and government in Sibiu on 9 May. In the run up to this summit and the upcoming European Parliament elections, on 20 March 2019 the Committee adopted an exhaustive opinion entitled *Listening to the citizens of Europe for a sustainable future*, which sets out the EESC's vision for the future of Europe from the point of view of European civil society.

This opinion, which was adopted by a very large majority, reflects the overwhelming support that members of the EESC wanted to give civil society and also aims to provide our institution with a benchmark document.

As the EESC, we had already started working on the topic of the future of Europe some years ago, organising a major debate around the European Commission White Paper, which was adopted on 1 March 2017.

The EESC held 27 national debates in Member States and consulted organised civil society on the Commission's text. We included the ESEC in these reflections and work from the outset.

In this respect, I can clearly recall the consultation with French organised civil society right here in the Palais d'Iéna on 18 May 2017, which produced very conclusive results. This meeting contributed to the resolution that the EESC adopted on 5 July 2017 in response to the Commission's White Paper.

Today, the opinion adopted by the EESC on 20 March 2019 allows us to "come full circle" and outline European civil society's vision for the future of Europe. For us it is clear that sustainable development, an ambitious strategy that allows us to combine economic, social and environmental needs, will need to be the banner we march under in the coming decade.

This vision fits within the context of the profound transformations the EU is facing. The four major transformations we have identified, and that we are paying particular attention to, relate to democratic change, the transition to a digital economy, the transition to a low-carbon economy and social transformation, which is intrinsically linked to the digital revolution and requires in-depth reflection on the future of work (the risk of a new "cybertariat" replacing the former "proletariat"), the challenges of education and training, and social dialogue. This transformation must also fully include the fight against growing inequalities and the fight to eradicate poverty.

In my speech here on 14 November last year, I discussed these major changes in depth and therefore I will not go into them again.

But what is crucial is ensuring that the way these transitions are handled does not undermine the values that give the European model its character, which is truly democratic, economically effective, socially just and open to the rest of the world.

In this context, the EESC's vision for the future is that the European Union must become a world leader in sustainable development. The new European strategy for the next ten years must be about sustainable development in its three dimensions: ecology, economy and equality.

As you know, the European Commission adopted a discussion paper on 30 January last year on the 2030 Agenda. This approach consists of strengthening the European Union's commitment to the sustainable development strategy as adopted in the United Nations in 2015. This Commission document, like the White Paper on the future of Europe, outlines scenarios for European action on sustainable development. Of course, we are in favour of the most ambitious scenario, the one in which sustainable development becomes not *one* but *the* strategy of the EU by 2030 and that the European Semester, the EU's effective system for economic and social governance, is used in service of this strategy.

Indeed, if we have identified the EU's strategy for the next ten years, and the instrument for carrying it out, we must also provide funding for it.

And as far as the budget is concerned, if I may say so, we are not there yet. Reviving the European project involves a substantial budget because, as Jacques Delors might have said: "we must have the means to match our ambitions". The threshold of 1.14 % of GNP to build the multiannual financial perspectives for 2021-2027 is nowhere near sufficient to meet these challenges.

We certainly appreciate the difficulty of the task that Commissioner Oettinger faces, between the departure of the United Kingdom (after 46 years of participation in the European project, albeit a participation that was sometimes "unique") and Member States that are reluctant to increase the EU budget...nevertheless, the budget is the key marker of the European project, as with any other project.

With regard to financing of sustainable development, in its proposal of 1 May 2018 the Commission suggested dedicating 25 % of the total budget to it: this is definitely a good first step.

However, the European Parliament proposes dedicating 30 %, while we, the EESC, propose 40 %. Ambitious figures for an ambitious project!

In the current context where democracy has become "low-intensity", according to the Italian thinker Raffaele Simone, the future of Europe cannot be conceived and developed unless the values that have underpinned the European project since its origins remain at the heart of the development of the EU and its future policies: freedom, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, and of course democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities.

Similarly, the cultural dimension of the European project must be recognised, affirmed and factored into all EU policies.

Successful implementation of the proposed strategy also requires significant public involvement and an effective and vibrant communication policy.

Europe is full of specific examples that reveal its true colours to its citizens everyday, be it the Erasmus project, the achievements of structural funds or even the reduction in cost of international phone calls, getting rid of plastic in the sea, etc.

We must keep going along this path: we must combat the eurosceptics and populists who will use any argument to tarnish Europe's image. Democracy needs all our attention if we are to preserve the peace we have built over the last 60 years. I would note that the citizens of Europe outside of the EU loudly proclaim their love for it; so far, the biggest pro-European demonstrations had been in Ukraine - now they are happening in London!

The first 60 years of European integration were a period of peace, stability and prosperity for several generations of Europeans.

And we must appreciate the significance of the changes that have been happening for the past decade, apart from the fourth industrial revolution. The French economist François Lenglet has just shown in his recently published book that, after each economic and financial crash, societies become rigid and close up, almost cyclically: in the 30s after the 1929 crisis, and the 2010s after the 2008 crisis, to name just the two most recent cycles.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The EESC pays close attention to the social dimension of the European project. Social cohesion is really an essential element of democracy, and even economic efficiency; without social cohesion, the very foundations of democracy are at risk.

The cooperation between the EESC and the ESEC is also very close when it comes to the social dimension of Europe. To prepare our opinions on the European Pillar of Social Rights, we jointly organised a symposium on this theme on 14 October 2016 here at the Palais d'Iéna.

The solemn proclamation of the Pillar in Gothenburg in November 2017 was a turning point for a social Europe as President Jean-Claude Juncker managed to "re-draw the lines". The Pillar merely reaffirms 20 rights and principles that were already covered in the *acquis communautaire*. However, as a result of the Pillar, the Commission was able to adopt legislative or policy proposals which will further consolidate European social policy once they are formally and finally approved by the Council.

Social Europe will be enriched by a new directive on work/life balance, by a directive on transparent and predictable working conditions and by the creation of a European Labour Authority.

Perhaps you are already aware that the EESC successfully adopted a major opinion on minimum income at its February plenary session. Led by my predecessor George Dassis, who was the rapporteur, the Committee adopted this opinion which, despite a counter-opinion from the Employers' group, seals an agreement between employers, employees and civil society on the principle of establishing a minimum income at the European level.

The adoption of this opinion confirms the role of the EESC as a trailblazer in major societal debates at European level.

Before I conclude, I would like to briefly mention the conference the EESC organised on 21 February entitled "Civil Society for rEUnaissance".

I would like to thank Vice-President Carole Couvert for her participation in this event, particularly the closing debate with other presidents of national economic and social councils.

The event made a big splash, with over 400 participants and 26 speakers from different backgrounds. It gave a voice to civil society in the run-up to the European elections.

As we are well aware, these elections will be decisive. They call on civil society at the European and national levels to mobilise. We must join forces to ensure a high turnout and a clear and strong mandate for the new European institutions in the years to come. A strong mandate means being precise in our demands with the European institutions that will be renewed in 2019: we want the EU to become the world leader on the sustainable agenda, focusing, among other things, on an effective instrument of governance (the European Semester) and to be able to count on a proper budget!

For my part, I still believe that defending our fundamental values as defined in articles 2 and 3 of the treaty, implementation of the sustainable development agenda and the real involvement of young people must be at the heart of our commitment to keep the European project going.

Thank you for your attention!