Editorial

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"Civil society participation to the EU constitutional debate"

The public response in many countries to the current phase of European Union integration is perennially distant and cold. Evidence for this is the speed with which the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, no more than a celebration, has largely disappeared from the radar in most countries.

Negotiations in the months ahead on the revision of the constitutional treaty must not therefore be allowed to take place only behind the closed doors of the new intergovernmental conference. European civil society networks are rightly calling for the IGC to be accompanied by a broad public debate, centring not only on the Union’s main policies but also on the original objectives of the European integration process. Direct participation in the European debate by national civil society organisations has long been a serious weak point; and most of the consultation processes to date have involved pro-European umbrella organisations, based in Brussels or nearby. Until there is a real quantum leap in terms of involving civil society organisations at local and national level, the distance and lack of consensus will unfortunately remain.

The EESC can contribute in a real and innovative way. It is already providing an important input to the debate by national civil society organisations; EESC Bureau meetings away from Brussels; the work of the Liaison Group; the debates held during the European Convention and Group III Bureau in individual EU countries, allowing time for meetings and debate with national civil society organisations; EESC Bureau meetings away from Brussels; the work of the Liaison Group; the debates held during the European Convention and those planned for the near future; growing cooperation with various national economic and social councils; the dozens of events hosted or promoted by the EESC; the everyday work of individual members.

We need to build on these achievements and transform them into a more clearly defined process. From the Berlin Declaration in March, to the initiatives planned for 2008 for the EESC’s 50th anniversary and the European elections in 2009, there is a need to ensure that this process blends in as part of a single major public debate on the future of Europe, both in terms of the various national events, and of events taking place in Brussels.

It would also be worth considering holding a major event involving European civil society and the main national organisations and networks during the intergovernmental conference, as a possible prelude to series of events along the lines of “European Civil Society Days”, to take place simultaneously in the majority of Member States.

This would be an increasingly effective and high-profile means of contributing to the objective we share with all the EU institutions: that of bringing Europe to the people and putting them centre-stage.

Interview with Mr Rasmus KJELDAHL, President of BEUC

The Consumers and Environment category of the EESC has twenty-three members, all of whom hail from Group III. They represent a wide cross-section of consumer interests throughout Europe and have some questions for the main at the top of the European Consumers’ Organisation BEUC.

EUROPE III - Are you satisfied with the influence that BEUC has on EU-developments, laws and directives in the consumer field?

"We are never satisfied - there is always so much more to do, and our resources are very limited. Furthermore BEUC is heavily outnumbered by the more than 15,000 industry lobbyists in Brussels. On the other hand we are pleased that we tend to score highly in opinion surveys among decision-makers - most of them say they would like to see and hear more of us.”

EUROPE III - Do you have enough access to the Commissioner and do you appreciate her role in improving the influence of the European consumer?

"Commissioner Kuneva has made a great start in raising the profile of consumer policy and visiting already most of the countries. We were very happy to receive her in our organisation in the beginning of April. And, we are very happy to work with her to put consumer policy at the centre of EU policies across the whole of the Commission - not only Sanco.”

EUROPE III - What do you think of the role played by the European Parliament in this process?

"We have mixed views regarding the Parliament. It has often - but by no means always -been the most consumer-friendly of the three main decision-making institutions. Among current issues we would like to see the Parliament do better on obesity, nutritional labelling, and the rights of consumers in relation to intellectual property protection in the digital environment. On the intense marketing of foods with high levels of sugar, salt or fat, especially for children, the Parliament identified the problem clearly, but sadly carefully avoided proposing any practical action to tackle the problem."

EUROPE III - Group III is also composed of members who represent SMEs and farmer’s interests and the EESC includes members representing industry and trade organisations’ concerns across Europe. How do you see BEUC’s relationship with organisations representing these sectors? Are there any differences in the type of approach and dialogue with these sectors?

"BEUC has extensive contacts and interacts continuously with industry, trade, professional and farmers groups, SMEs etc. etc. This is an essential element to understanding the environment in which we work and the issues with which we deal.”

EUROPE III - What is your opinion on the growth of the consumer organisations in the EU?

"There has been positive growth in many of the old member states, but the big challenge now is to develop strong, consumer movements in the newer member states. Our friends there are making progress, but they face many obstacles, including serious problems of resources and a political and social environment that is not yet fully supportive of civil society pluralism and public discourse - unfortunately a comment that might also be true in some of the old member states.”

EUROPE III - The level of influence that consumer organisations have on their national governments in the different EU-countries varies quite a lot. How do you give support to the smaller organisations?

"By joining BEUC our members gain access to a vast range of information and intelligence about developments at EU level. Sometimes, indeed, our members may know of some developments before their governments do - but the governments may have to wait to be informed through official or institutional means. We also have a range of support services, including training, a bi-lateral mentoring scheme for member associations in new member states, a project to build up testing and publication skills etc.”

EUROPE III - What, in your view, are the most important EU-developments in the interest of consumers in 2007 and 2008?

"Apart from the ongoing work with the Consumer Acquis I think that it is the work on combating obesity and diet-related diseases. The question of consumer rights in the digital environment is also crucial. More and more our entertainment, our information, news, education and culture are coming to us in digital form. Consumers have few clear rights vis-a-vis its suppliers and content right holders in this domain. We are trying to deal with a 21st century technology with a 19th century consumer protection regime.”

EUROPE III - What is the most crucial need of European consumers where you would like to see some action from the Commission or the Commissioner?

"As stated above we want to see some effective action on obesity and diet-related diseases. And in the other area of equally global importance we need to have a clear set of consumer rights in the digital environment.”

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News from the EEB

On 6 June representatives of the EEB, UN/Economic Commission for Europe, member States, the Commission and MEPs got together to examine the progress of the EU and its Member States for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention and the inter-linkage with the EU Directives on the Convention. The debate concentrated on the next steps to take at national and European level to improve the compliance with the Aarhus Convention setting the principle on “environmental democracy” in terms of access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to environmental matters. The programmes of the two seminars are available on the EEB web-site: http://www.eeb.org/activities/env_inter/ac/Liability/Liability-Seminar-Prp-040607.pdf

BEUC has a new Director General

Monique Goyens has been designated as the new Director-General of BEUC and will take over from Jan Muravy, on his retirement in October 2007. She is currently the Director of the Commission Consumer Protection in Brussels, before moving to the Institute of International Relations at Louvain-la-Neuve, where she is a full professor, before moving to the Institute of International Relations at Louvain-la-Neuve, where she is a full professor. She is the author and editor of numerous articles and publications on consumer law and policy.

More BEUC news available on their website: http://www.beuc.org

News from the EESC

The Social Economy Category is the largest EESC category, held its second extraordinary meeting of the year last June 13th. The meeting was aimed to correct an ambivalent and improving an ambitious work plan for the next two years focused on increasing the visibility of Social Economy’s role. The new elected spokesperson, Mr. Cabo de Landa presented the Social Economy Category Work Programme for the upcoming two years, which was warmly welcomed by attendees. This programme is structured in four working axes, namely internal, external visibility, reflection and discussion and methodology will be implemented through a series of work axes. The construction of bridges with other Social Economy stakeholders (European Parliament Intergroup on Social Economy, Network of Social Economy Liaison Groups etc), mainstreaming and giving visibility to Social Economy in the EESC work, improving internal coordination and composition, including Social Economy issues in the upcoming presidencies, are just some of the tasks to be undertaken by the category during this period. One of the category’s top priority activities for the last quarter of 2007 will be a planned high-level seminar on Social Economy at the EESC which, it is intended, could also be an occasion to launch the study “The Social Economy in the European Union” and to discuss it with representatives of European Institutions, representatives of member states and Social Economy organisations.

At the June 2007 meeting, Ana Maria Nogueira, from the European Commission’s DG Employment, gave a presentation on how the EESC own-initiative opinion on the Role of the European Social Partners in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy holds the doors for the first time to a direct dialogue Environment and Sustainable Development and/or the Social Platform for Lifelong Learning).

The implementation of the programme will take place in close cooperation with various representatives of the European organisations and networks, on mechanisms of dialogue with EU institutions and on civil dialogue and representativity.

The next meeting will take place on 6 September 2007.

The Sustainable Development Observatory

hold in third meeting at the German national parliament (Deutscher Bundestag) in Berlin on 6 June. It hosted an informal hearing on the National Sustainable Development Councils. Speakers were invited from National Councils for Sustainable Development in Germany (Mr Volker Haufler, President), of Portugal (Mr Mario Serrano-Morales), of Belgium (Mr Jan De Smets, Executive secretary) and of Czech Republic (Ms Jana Hlavackova) to present the experiences, the advisory work of councils in their countries. The National Sustainable Development Councils are statutory bodies with the mission to advise national and regional governments in the policy fields related to environment and sustainable development and to provide a dialogue on sustainable development between stakeholders. The hearing highlighted how Councils’ task varies from country to country and the debate which followed involving the national councils, members of the National Councils for Sustainable Development, rapporteur Mr Haufler (GR III-CZ), will be the next meeting and to promote best practices. The next SDO meeting is scheduled for 9 September 2007.
Mr Gerd WOLF (DE) will chair the study group for the option on "European Space Policy" – INT/360. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Tomasz CZAJKOWSKI (PL), Mr Corrado ROSSETTO (IT) and Mr Stylianos STAIKOS (EL). Mrs Reine-Claude MADER-SAUSSA YE (FR) is the Co-Rapporteur for the option on: “Retail Financial Services in the Single Market” – INT/361. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Panagiotis KGFOKAS (EL), Mr Charalampos KOLOTRINOS (CT) and Mr Michael SMYTH (IR). Mr Panagiotis KGFOKAS (EL), Mrs Renate HEINISCH (DE) and Mrs Elbistra Szadzianiska will sit on the study group on: “Innovative Medicines Initiative Joint Undertaking/ARTEMIS Joint Undertaking to implement a Joint Technology Initiative in Embedded Computing Systems” – INT/363/364. For the INT/365 option on: “Aspects of the sale of consumer goods and associated guarantees including analysis of the costs of ‘production vs. purchasing’ liability”, the Group III members are: Mr Latvia GARAI (HU), Mrs Benedicte FEDERSPIEL (DK), Mr Radu NICOLAEVICI (RO) and Mr Jorge PEGADO LEDRAM (ES). Mr Corrado ROSSETTO (IT) and Mr Henk GHIGONIS (FR) will chair the study group on: “Trans-European networks: Towards an integrated approach” – TEN/288. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Luc RIBBE (BE), Mr Frank ALLEN (DE) and Mr Mária HERCZOG (HU). Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Hubert GHIGONIS (FR) and Mr Nikolaos LIOLOS (EL) will chair the study group on: “Anticipating market/cargo of goods by road” – TEN/303. The Group III members on the study group: “Common rules concerning the conditions to be complied with in pursuance of road transport operation” – TEN/304 are, Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Hubert GHIGONIS (FR) and Mrs Jane MORRICE (UK). Mr Richard ADAMS (UK) is the Rapporteur for the option on: “Cruise ship diamantina” – NET/185. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Kwiatkowski KAMIENIECKI (PL) and Mr Kaul NURM (EE). The CUMI supplementary option on: “European space policy” will be chaired by Mr János TÓTH (HU) and the other Group III member is Mr Corrado ROSSETTO (IT). For the option ECO/209 on the “4th report on economic and social cohesion”, Mr Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES), Mr Luděk JÍROVEC (CZ), Mr Soppo KALLIO (FI), Mrs Marzena MINDZIA-DROZD (PL) and Mr Antonio METZLER (DE) are the members from Group III. For the opinion ECO/199 on the “6th report on economic and social cohesion”, Mr Miguel Ángel CABRA DE LUNA (ES), Mr Luděk JÍROVEC (CZ), Mr Soppo KALLIO (FI), Mrs Marzena MINDZIA-DROZD (PL) and Mr Antonio METZLER (DE) are the members from Group III. Mrs Renate HEINISCH (DE) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Promoting access to a public account to individuals in generations”. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mrs Guillaume LEmercier, Mr Lucian BOUS (FR), Mr Tomasz CZAJKOWSKI (PL) and Mrs Maria HERCZOG (IH). Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Luc RIBBE (BE). The aim of the 3-day seminar in Barbados was to enable NGOs, trade unions and workers to engage in a common position and a Final Declaration that could be endorsed by everyone. As representative for consumers and the environment I was invited to the meeting along with consumer and environment representatives from the Caribbean. We came to the conclusion that: trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the ‘Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the...”

An Insight Into Youth Policy and Leadership

The Bureau of Group III will hold an extraordinary meeting in Lisbon on Monday 2 July 2007. The main objective of the event will be to engage in an open dialogue with Portuguese civil society organisations on themes related to the ‘Organisation, representation, and functioning of NGOs in a democratic society’. The keynote address will be delivered by Prof. Alfredo BRUETO da COSTA, President of National Economic and Social Council of Portugal where he will present: ‘An overview of the Portuguese NGO model: strengths and weaknesses –’. Round-table debates will be held on sub-themes such as the ‘Legitimacy and representativeness: the basic principles of civic organisations’ and the ‘Levels of representation and democratic intervention: the stakeholders view of the case for a European status for NGOs, associations and foundations’. The co-chair of the EESC’s Liaison Group, Mr Jean Me Jean-Marie RORANT, will moderate a debate on the theme: ‘Dialogue with political and economic power: consultation and lobbying’. A broad cross-section of civil society organisations from Portugal have been invited to attend. Report from Inger PERSSON (SV) of the 9th. Regional seminar of ACP-EU economic and sustainable land management and the promotion of tourism on the environment, support for more sustainable land management and the promotion of heritage and eco-tourism. The delegates called for the adoption of better regulation on consumer protection and for the intensification of cooperation on consumer policy and on the protection of consumers’ health. In this context, the activities of the Caribbean Consumer Council should be supported. Whilst the consumer and environmental organisations would have liked to develop the text further as the final document, the Car- dibbean representatives were pleased with the text that was adopted in the Declaration.

I would conclude that the general impression of the three-day seminar was very positive. Following a lot of discussion, all the delegates were able to agree on a single text. One of the key recommendations was for non-state players from the region to be directly involved in the implementation of the future EPA, via a Joint EPA Consultative Committee comprising Caribbean and EU non-state players.

Mr Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALARRE (ES) will chair the study group for the exploratory option on: “Governance and economic activity in building – contribution of mid-sizes” – TEN/299. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mrs Lavinia ANDRE (RO), Mr Angelo GRASSO (IT), Mr Krzysztof KAMIENIECKI (PL) and Mr Algirdas SIUSPINKAS (LT).

Mr Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALARRE (ES) will chair the study group for the exploratory option on: “Governance and economic activity in building – contribution of mid-sizes” – TEN/299. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mrs Lavinia ANDRE (RO), Mr Angelo GRASSO (IT), Mr Krzysztof KAMIENIECKI (PL) and Mr Algirdas SIUSPINKAS (LT). The Group III members on the study group: “Galileo at a cross-road: the implementation of the European GNSS programme” – TEN/300 are, Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Panagiotis KGFOKAS (EL) and Mr Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALARRE (ES).

Mr Hubert GHIGONIS (FR) will chair the study group on: “Review of the Community Strategy to reduce CO2 emissions from passenger cars and light commercial vehicles’’ – TEN/301. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Zbigniew KOTOWSKI (PL) and Mr Luk RIBBE (BE).

Mr Frank ALLEN (DE) will be the Rapporteur, working alone, for the option on: “Common rules for the international carriage of passengers and freight” – TEN/302.

The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Zbigniew KOTOWSKI (PL) and Mr Luk RIBBE (BE).

Mr Hubert GHIGONIS (FR) will chair the study group on: “Trans-European networks: Towards an integrated approach” – TEN/288. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Luc RIBBE (BE), Mr Frank ALLEN (DE) and Mr Mária HERCZOG (HU).

The aim of the 3-day seminar in Barbados was to enable NGOs, trade unions and workers to engage in a common position and a Final Declaration that could be endorsed by everyone. As representative for consumers and the environment I was invited to the meeting along with consumer and environment representatives from the Caribbean. We came to the conclusion that: trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the “Trade unions in the Caribbean region will support the ...”

Ms Cecilia MUNCH (DK) and Mr Massimo SANTUCCI (IT) were the members from Group II. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Roberto CONFALONIERI (IT), Mr Hubert GHIGONIS (FR) and Mrs Jane MORRICE (UK). Mr Richard ADAMS (UK) is the Rapporteur for the option on: “Cruise ship diamantina” – NET/185. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mr Kwiatkowski KAMIENIECKI (PL) and Mr Kaul NURM (EE). The CUMI supplementary option on: “European space policy” will be chaired by Mr János TÓTH (HU) and the other Group III member is Mr Corrado ROSSETTO (IT). For the option ECO/209 on the “4th report on economic and social cohesion”, Mr Miguel Angel CABRA DE LUNA (ES), Mr Luděk JÍROVEC (CZ), Mr Soppo KALLIO (FI), Mrs Marzena MINDZIA-DROZD (PL) and Mr Antonio METZLER (DE) are the members from Group III. For the opinion ECO/199 on the “6th report on economic and social cohesion”, Mr Miguel Angel CABRA DE LUNA (ES), Mr Luděk JÍROVEC (CZ), Mr Soppo KALLIO (FI), Mrs Marzena MINDZIA-DROZD (PL) and Mr Antonio METZLER (DE) are the members from Group III. Mrs Renate HEINISCH (DE) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Promoting access to a public account to individuals in generations”. The other Group III members of this study group are: Mrs Guillaume LEmercier, Mr Lucian BOUS (FR), Mr Tomasz CZAJKOWSKI (PL) and Mrs Maria HERCZOG (IH).
At its plenary session on 30-31 May the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

Mrs Jillian van TURNHOUT (IE) SOC/297 “European Strategy on alcohol related harm” (EESC opinion 807/07)

In this opinion, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the Communication from the Commission, ‘An EU strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol related harm’. However, the EESC regrets that the Communication falls far short of a ‘comprehensive strategy’ which was invited in the Council Conclusions of 5 June 2001.

Furthermore, the EESC asks the Commission, in recognition of its twin obligations, to show strong leadership by actively supporting Member States in their efforts to provide a high level of health protection by reducing alcohol related harm and to ensure that Community action complements national policies.

The EESC welcomes the development of a common evidence base, including standardised definitions for data collection, which will help create a strong EU added value dimension. The EESC regrets that most of the priority areas identified do not include specific objectives with clear measurable targets and timelines and suggests that a reduction in the exposure of children to alcohol products, advertising and promotions be included as a specific objective to provide greater protection to children. It also urges the Commission to address the economic consequences of alcohol related harm. The negative effects go against the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy and have implications for the workplace, society and the economy.

In conclusion, the EESC strongly recommends that education and awareness raising initiatives should be part of an overall integrated strategy to reduce alcohol related harm.

Mr Richard ADAMS (UK) NAT/349 “Aversion activities/scheme for greenhouse gas emission ‘gloaming’” (EESC opinion 801/07)

The Committee welcomes the option in the text which offers a carefully considered and pragmatic approach to moderating and compensating for the rapidly growing volume of greenhouse gases emitted by the aviation industry.

By bringing aviation within the remit of the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) the scheme is itself potentially strengthened and made more robust as the new mechanism for tackling CO2 emissions at a global level.

The proposal is realistic. It recognises the strength of political, economic and consumer pressures for the continuing development of air travel and transport and the need for carbon price mechanisms of the ETS to compensate for one of the main, damaging external impacts of the aviation industry. The EESC welcomes the inclusion in the scheme of all flights into or out of Europe from 2012 but believes that the emissions cap – set approximately at the 2005 level – should be lower and more consistent with levels required of other sectors in the ETS.

In conclusion, the Committee recognises that this is a complex issue but feels the proposal is somewhat opaque and fails to present its advantages clearly. The proposal appeals in different ways and at various levels to the EU as a whole, to individual Member States, to different sectors of industry and society and to the individual. In particular the positive potential of the Directive to support and reinforce the ETS should be emphasised. It is also noted that active and complementary support will be required from other parts of the Commission, particularly Transport and Energy and Research.

Mr Mario CAMPLI (IT) NAT/352 “Fruit and vegetables” (EESC opinion 802/07)

In this opinion the EESC supports the Commission’s strategy aimed at turning the entire first pillar into a consistent and balanced whole. In this regard, it calls on the Commission to put in place an appropriate transitional programme for the fruit and vegetable sector so as to bring all the operators in the sector up to speed with the new system and, at the same time, to ensure that European consumers enjoy a high standard of quality and quantity.

The EESC notes that the Commission has made no proposals within the context of a budget that has not been increased. It also notes that by abolishing market withdrawals and export refunds the Commission is bringing into question an important resource in the resources potentially available for future operational programmes, but that these resources are needed and will not be available for investment by more efficient POs.

The EESC believes it necessary to introduce at least two corrections, whilst keeping to the principle of genuine budget neutrality: leaving the management of market crises out of the accounts relating to the POs’ operational programmes; and derogating from the 4.1 % limit when actions are co-financed at 60%, inter alia to allow POs that are already consolidated to continue fulfilling their role, and to allow POs that are 60% Community co-financed, so as to promote cooperation between producer organisations and group supply.

In conclusion, the EESC also notes the Commission proposal to entrust crisis management to POs. It calls on the Commission to put in place transparent criteria for crisis management to support non-member producer organisations and ensure that the instrument made available for this purpose can be used by all producers, so that any intervention in the event of a crisis will be effective and enable the markets in question to recover.

Mr Steffen NILSSON (SV) Co-Rapporteur (EESC opinion 804/07)

“Challenges and opportunities facing the EU in the context of globalisation”

In its opinion the EESC states that at international level, the EU response to the globalisation must be to contribute more forcefully to the establishment of a “state governed by the rule of law” promoting a humanist globalization based on the multilateralism, the fundamental rights of individuals, greater transparency on the financial markets and a high level of health and food safety for all population groups. In the field of international trade, the EESC takes the view that bilateral and regional approaches are beneficial only if they are complementary to the multilateralism pursued by the WTO.

Inside the EU, globalisation may be a source of opportunity for the European integration by setting up economic policies which are core aspects of the Lisbon Strategy. Organised civil society should promote the achievement of globalisation ‘with a human face’. The EESC stresses the need to involve the social partners and the various players representing organised civil society.

In conclusion, the achievement of both globalisation with a human dimension and European integration are matters which involve the people and organised civil society. If they are better informed and consulted and systematically involved, the people and the civil society on board a strategy which they have shaped and which they can make their own.

Mr Jorge PEÑADO LIZ (PT) INT/314 “Protection of consumers – distance contracts” (EESC opinion 795/07)

In this opinion, whilst noting the delay in this dossier, and following this communication in relation to the deadlines set down in the directive, the EESC welcomes the initiative and agrees with a group of the Commission’s comments. The Committee is of the view, however, that it would be valuable for a review of these rules to be carried out in the near future in conjunction with a review of those on the distance selling of financial services and certain aspects of electronic commerce, without waiting for a review of the Community acquis concerning consumer contracts to be concluded, out of a concern to make all the disparate provisions more accessible and easier to understand.

The EESC therefore urges the Commission to carry out a detailed analysis of the responses to its public consultation exercise that have been received in the meantime, to which it should add reliable data on the scope and scale of distance selling in the internal market, culminating in a public hearing of the interested parties.

The EESC disagrees with the Commission’s assessment of the consequences of the use made of the “minimum clause”, which it does not consider to be the cause of the directive’s implementation problems – which are rightly highlighted. The Committee does not, however, reject the possibility of envisaging a move towards total harmonisation, by means of regulation, provided that consumers are guaranteed a higher level of protection.

The EESC is also putting forward a broad range of specific recommendations, which it considers should be studied at the same time as the development of the internal market, in order to boost consumer safeguards and confidence, guaranteeing protection in this sector which is core aspect of the Lisbon Strategy and equivalent to that enjoyed by consumers concluding contracts face-to-face.

In conclusion, the EESC also points to the need for a particular focus on providing contracting parties with particular less well-informed consumers with real information, and also that there should be an effective system for sanctioning practices that breach existing legal provisions.

Mr Panagiotis GKOFAS – INT/356 “Food hygiene/abolition of price discrimination” (EESC opinion 797/07)

In this opinion, with regard to Community policies for better competitiveness and the Lisbon Strategy, the European Economic and Social Committee considers reducing the administrative burden placed on businesses by existing legislation to be a necessary and crucial factor in boosting competitiveness and achieving the goals of the Lisbon Agenda.

The proposal submitted to the EESC entails the amendment of two regulations: Regulation No 11 concerning the abolition of discrimination in transport rates and conditions, and Regulation No 852/2004 of the European Parliament and the Council on the hygiene of foodstuffs.

The EESC agrees with the amendment of Regulation 852/2004, intended to provide for the exemption of the relevant businesses from the requirements of Article 5(1) of Regulation (EC) No 852/2004, since these may be met through all the regulations’ other requirements.

However, the EESC considers that the exemption of businesses selling products directly to the final consumer should also be extended to small enterprises, as defined by Recommendation 2003/361/EC, which are core aspects of the Lisbon Strategy. In conclusion, the EESC considers that extending the exemption in this way will probably mean incorporating two requirements in the amendment of Article 5 of Regulation 852. The provision would include small enterprises and with their inclusion a specific reference and restrictions for catering businesses would be introduced.

Mr Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLE – TREN/295 “Protection of consumers” (EESC opinion 810/07)

In this opinion, the EESC supports the Commission’s initiative on eAccessibility, and urges it to further its work in the field. Given the strong interest raised by this topic, the EESC reserves the right to issue an additional opinion.

The EESC believes that the involvement of civil society organisations should be actively invited. The EESC is concerned that the implementation of a proper eAccessibility policy, through the promotion of support measures, for example, with regard to codes of conduct or regulation.

Support measures should focus on areas which make it easier for people with disabilities and older people to access the information society, and introduce them to new technologies as an ideal means of becoming socially integrated, preventing exclusion from the digital world and improving their quality of life.

In conclusion the EESC feels that public authorities in Member States should, in line with supranational guidelines, adopt this approach to make it financially possible for disabled or elderly peoples organisations to be involved in the digital world, and to facilitate their access to it.