Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation

22 October 2008, on the occasion of the election of the EESC President Mario Sepi
Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation

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On his election as President of the European Economic and Social Committee at the plenary session on 22 October 2008, Mario Sepi broke with tradition by organising a debate on Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation – the key theme of his presidency – alongside the speech outlining his programme, thereby giving a number of guests from the European institutions an opportunity to comment immediately on his policy programme.

The guest speakers invited to comment on the Sepi presidency’s priorities on 22 October were: Vladimir Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; Emilio Gabaglio, Chairman of the European Employment Committee and former General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation; and Maria João Rodrigues, Chairman of the European Commission’s high-level group of experts on mobility in Europe (Erasmus).

The discussion took place against the background of the current financial crisis, and reflected the European Economic and Social Committee’s desire to align the debate on its policies with the most urgent and topical issues on the European political agenda. As a result, a number of possible responses and proposals emerged, not least thanks to the press conference, attended by around 30 journalists, which was held immediately after the debate.

1. Mario Sepi: Restoring an emotional connection with the European Union

In the opening words of his inaugural speech the President gave a clear signal that he intends the main focus of his presidency to be reinvigorating the European Union, starting by remodelling the role of the Committee.

This will not only mean giving new impetus to the Committee’s consultative role, although this is certainly an important aspect, but also developing a new ability to respond to the expectations of the European public.

In his address, President Sepi focused on peoples’ feelings about the European Union, stressing the need to encourage European civil society to identify with the values underpinning the Treaty rather than simply asking people to give an opinion on economic, agricultural or other specific policy issues.

He noted that the Committee needs to play a key role in this area and that we can only exercise this role if we have “the confidence to do so. We must throw off the traditional passive stance [...] and take the lead in tackling the new context of globalisation, not to protect ourselves but to steer [it].”

How, then, can we best overcome economic crises and times of institutional deadlock?

“[W]e need to identify realistic ways of providing tangible responses to these concerns.”

In order to achieve these objectives, Mario Sepi has put together what he himself describes as an “ambitious programme”, which sets out the real challenges for relaunching European politics:

- **The Lisbon Treaty** and the practical implementation of the rules on participatory democracy;
- **The European social model** and the rights set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- **The new Lisbon strategy after 2010**.
The Lisbon Treaty
“If the European Union wants to take up the challenge of globalisation, substantial institutional progress is essential. The Treaty, with its successive stages and despite a number of issues which have not been clearly resolved, remains the only point of reference for all those who want to pursue Europe’s economic, social and political integration. The current globalisation phase cannot be tackled without credible institutions, tangible accountability and greater mutual support among countries and individuals. The Lisbon Treaty shows how the Member States have excluded the emotional dimension, which has alienated the public still further from European affairs. **Europe must face up to numerous challenges and the public needs real answers.**

Real answers are contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which sets out the rights of individuals in Europe. We now need to focus on their application, the rejection of discrimination, and their role in guiding our responses to the issues connected with immigration.

Better and more structured institutions may make it easier for those citizens who remain sceptical or disappointed to understand Europe’s role. We need to regain the “esprit de finesse”, the subtle logic that in recent years, for purely political reasons, has been discarded in favour of a model where the Member States are predominant, at the expense of the social model. **The European social model**

“Globalisation is not something that is detrimental to the European social model, but globalisation and the social model are two parallel realities. The presence of one does not undermine the existence of the other. A single, strong social model has made it possible over the years to strengthen social cohesion and has helped to achieve fuller and better employment. The current challenge is to consider the environment and the impact that economic growth can have on it. The European social model is neither a new concept nor an abstract assumption. It is a fundamental part of the EU’s history. The founding fathers had already stressed in the 1957 Treaty of Rome that customs union should have been achieved not just to further Member States’ economic development but also to increase social cohesion and help achieve full, better employment. The Treaty of Rome also stated the need for due consideration to be given to the environment and the potential impact of economic development thereon.”

The President pointed out, however, that the European social model is now subject to two major criticisms:

– that it is not equipped to meet the challenges of globalisation;
– that it is not economically sustainable.

“Both can be refuted. Let us remember that self-regulation of the financial system has been a failure and that new rules, along with institutions to apply them rigorously, are needed.”

It is therefore possible to face up to globalisation whilst also supporting the European social model, which combines solidarity with competitiveness. In the words of Mario Sepi:

“**Innovation must be at the heart of our concerns - innovation in every sector of the economy, society and our institutions. There is now an urgent need to review the entire spectrum of European policies, not just social policy.**

In particular, as regards social policy, competition principles should not be applied to social security expenditure. Rather, social policy needs to be harmonised.

A social policy in which salaries are low means businesses which are less innovative and less able to respond to competition. It is precisely...
innovation which is the key to strengthening our businesses and, more generally, our development model. More intensive social dialogue is also needed, at both European and national levels, to introduce elements of flexibility.”

The Lisbon Strategy

“There is no doubt that the EU’s most effective response to the challenge of globalisation is the Lisbon Strategy.

At the heart of the project lies an original, necessary concept.

This concept is based on synergy between programmes and synchronised action in the fields of economic policy, social progress and respect for the environment, making the system as a whole more competitive.

This is a difficult approach to implement, but it is also the only way of addressing the new international situation.”

Why are the results still not satisfactory?

“As regards this strategy the Community method has been discarded in favour of a model that transfers most powers and responsibilities to the Member States, giving the European institutions insufficient coordinating powers.

Jacques Delors said that the European Union is a community of states and peoples – and, according to President Sepi – in recent years the former have prevailed by a long way, greatly to the detriment of the institutional balance laid down in the Treaties. Here, too, the emotional dimension, which would enable the States to advance civilisation, is missing. Europe – as the President stressed – needs to be founded on sound and unshakeable principles such as non-discrimination, reducing conflicts, and international stability if it is to play an effective guiding role.”

The European Economic and Social Committee is the only institutional voice of organised civil society and of the organisations present within the various Member States. It cannot, therefore, relate to a half-Europe with no heart.

“The Committee’s model is one of an institutional body which intends to perform its consultative role fully, making its representativeness and influence clear not only in the institutions but also to the national and European public.

We need to take a new look at the EESC, bring in more transparency and professionalism so that it is perceived as giving a genuine voice to public concerns.

Greater professionalism will mean enabling the Committee to ask for appropriate answers from its institutional partners and to become an excellent example of participatory democracy. Institutional democracy increasingly needs to forge ties with organised civil society. Our expertise is useful in many countries which feel the need for participatory democracy and here too we have a key role to play.”
2. Commissioner Vladimir Špidla:
Participatory democracy and development of the European Union

During his speech, Vladimir Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, highlighted the importance of the EESC “in reducing the distance between the European institutions and social realities. It plays a key role in the context of participatory democracy and is a bridge between the European institutions and European civil society. The primary role of the EESC has been strengthened not least thanks to stronger cooperation with the national ESCs.”

The Commissioner also stated that “the role of the EESC could have a greater impact if it issued more own-initiative opinions whilst ensuring that these respond to urgent issues.”

The new Treaty aims to ensure a strong partnership among the institutions, which could lead to recovery and growth in what is a fragile international environment.

It is no coincidence that Commissioner Špidla spoke of the European Commission’s desire to “consolidate and strengthen Europe’s social dimension”.

The Commission has a specific idea of the European social model, where each Member State provides social protection for its own citizens, and social dialogue is continuous and active. “This provides certainty and a benchmark.”

Several mentions were made of the principle of non-discrimination, which is the foundation for proper functioning of the social protection sector.

With regard to the Lisbon strategy, the Commissioner again confirmed that “this is a priority for the Commission. There is a need to create new jobs and better conditions for workers through policies that are more attentive to their needs.”

The Commissioner also issued a clarion call for cooperation between the Commission and the EESC, stating that this was the only way of limiting the risks associated with the two major challenges of globalisation and demographic change.
3. President Emilio Gabaglio: The need for renewed political will

Emilio Gabaglio, Chairman of the European Employment Committee and former General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, used his speech to draw attention to the period of uncertainty the European Union was currently experiencing, but firmly reiterated that “the European Union has the human, intellectual and material resources necessary to overcome this difficult time”. All that was needed, in his view, was the political will.

The European Union has always demonstrated its ability to respond well to crises and emergencies, using its initiative and cohesion to avoid serious damage to employment and economic growth.

Mr Gabaglio’s speech above all analysed Europe’s problems from the point of view of workers and ordinary citizens: “The primary objective of the European Union is to avoid economic and financial crises having a negative impact on workers’ lives.

That is why Member States’ budget policies alone are not sufficient to increase growth and employment and why there is a need for effective European policy decisions that can provide added value.

The added value may be represented by launching an EU project investing in physical or virtual infrastructure and “green” technologies”. Such a programme could not only support economic activity and employment, but also improve the long-term competitiveness of the European economy.

Mr Gabaglio strongly supported the ambitious role the European Union needs to play to contribute to the democratic governance of globalisation: “a new concept of bottom-up development that benefits everyone and guides the process and the dynamism of a new kind of social and civic development.”

For Europe to carry out this role in the best possible way, Mr Gabaglio stated that three prerequisites need to be met:

1. Economic stability: the EU needs to strengthen sustainable economic growth and create new, open, dynamic labour markets. Only then will it be possible to increase and improve employment. Strong economic structures are vital if Europe is to have a leading role on the international stage.
2. Political stability: we need strong and stable political institutions in order to overcome the political impasse in which Europe has been stuck for some time. We need more effective, efficient institutions to ensure that Europe speaks with one mind and one voice on the international stage. The ratification of the Lisbon treaty is therefore becoming necessary and urgent.

3. European social model: the shared values and principles on which the European Union is founded and which are guaranteed by the Charter of Rights, play an essential and indispensable part in giving Europe a human and social face. Europe should therefore stop feeling guilty about its European social model, which can enable it to manage the process of globalisation with fairness and solidarity.

To quote Jacques Delors: “Europe must adapt, but must not disown itself.”

Mr Gabaglio’s three points show that the EESC cannot remain on the sidelines or play a secondary role. It represents the forces of European society, various interests and ambitions, and is the focal point, the instrument that Europe needs in order to best fulfil its role.

4. The founder of the Lisbon Strategy, Maria João Rodrigues: competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion

Ms Rodrigues is considered the founder of the Lisbon Strategy. Her speech focused on the instruments the European Union needs in order to overcome crises. Ms Rodrigues stressed “the need to create a regulated financial system with sound institutions that are able to respond in the best possible way to major challenges, the most urgent of which are climate change and the search for renewable energy sources”.

Aside from reforms at national level, we need an ambitious, incisive shared agenda to release “strong synergies between innovation, new environmental technologies and strong social cohesion”.

These must form the pillars of a new European policy. These pillars are reflected in the Lisbon Strategy, which must inspire Europe at a time when it “needs to create a new situation where environmental protection and the economic system are interlinked”.

The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is therefore an urgent priority if Europe is to be given renewed leadership and European citizenship given new impetus.

Ms Rodrigues went on to say that “both participatory democracy and representative democracy are at the heart of how Europe works, and each can only exist if it supports the other”. Echoing Mr Sepi’s thoughts, Ms Rodrigues stressed that, “A strong, dynamic European Economic and Social Committee that gives ever more room to civil society is key to overcoming future challenges.”
The presidents of the three groups expressed their support for President Sepi immediately after his speech.

– Henri Malosse, president of Group I, drew attention to the EESC’s “worthwhile and respectable” role and expressed strong support for “the idea of giving vigorous new impetus to the EESC’s consultative role, making the best possible use of the power of initiative, which is as necessary and urgent an issue as the Lisbon strategy. However, in this context, more consideration must be given to small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the backbone of the European economy.”

With regard to the future of the European Union, he suggested that there was a need for open and participative EU policies that encouraged more exchanges of information among Member States and promoted participation in the building of European citizenship.

– The president of Group II, Georgios Dassis analysed the important role of the European public in creating better institutions. “To ensure that the public continues to believe in Europe, the shared principles and values on which it is founded need to be respected. Europe needs solidarity, social justice and economic cohesion. To achieve this, change is needed in European policy. Change does not come by itself; someone needs to effect it. Why shouldn’t that be the EESC?”

– Staffan Nilsson, Group III, focused attention on the European Union’s global dimension. “Europe needs to be seen by third countries as an example of civil society and of a new economic reality. A European social model exists and it needs to be strengthened, not only in the economic context, but also in many other areas.”
6. Challenges and projects:
European renewal and common objectives

The debate held on 22 October 2008 demonstrated that there was strong support for Mr Sepi’s political programme and a significant desire for cooperation between the institutions and civil society.

The president’s speech, together with those of the various institutional speakers, created an occasion for discussion and agreement on shared challenges and goals.

Mr Sepi was offered a number of suggestions.

First and foremost, the European Economic and Social Committee’s activities needed to be given more political impetus.

Mr Sepi’s emphasis on the emotional dimension of the European Union and the need to put listening to the public’s needs and requests back on the agenda was taken up by many speakers and could be described as the common thread running through the debate.

Everyone agreed that the Lisbon Treaty was the key to achieving a new political system in Europe that strengthened the role of the institutions but also provided for a clear and strong reference to the European social model – which, as Group III president Staffan Nilsson pointed out, does not exist only in the economic and financial sphere, but affects every aspect of life in the European Union.

Europe must base its strength to grow and assert itself on the rights contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which distinguish it from other structures elsewhere in the world.

In Mr Sepi’s words:

“In recent years, the community of states has prevailed over the community of peoples. In difficult and complex times such as this, Europe needs to regain a strong identity: civil society must feel that it is an integral part of what is happening in Europe and the institutions need to be able to respond to its requests.

The Committee needs to focus on this and make good use of its ability to adopt own-initiative opinions on key topics. These enable the European Economic and Social Committee to give voice to the problems to which civil society wants answers.”

The new president’s image is therefore one of a Committee well-equipped to deal with difficult situations and crises: it is precisely difficult times that can help shift the balance within the European Union and help credible and tangible responses to emerge.
7. Questions from the media: 
Looking towards the future of the Committee

Around thirty journalists representing newspapers and international media from various countries took part in the press conference that was held immediately following the plenary debate.

President Sepi, together with Ms Rodrigues, Mr Gabaglio and the Committee vice-president Irini Pari, responded to questions on the relaunch of the Committee’s role.

What emerged most clearly from the discussion was that communication needed to be improved.

“The Committee’s actions must have an impact on European public opinion and the Committee therefore needs to plan its actions and work with the media in a more targeted fashion”, Irini Pari told the journalists, emphasising that “the European Economic and Social Committee is not the “Cinderella” of the institutions, but a place of dialogue and consensus between the economic and social forces of civil society. Indeed, the solidarity that exists between the Member States and the institutions means that the latter also need to seek concrete measures to develop greater economic growth, innovative policies and the creation of new job opportunities”.

In response to various questions from the press, President Sepi focused on how to relaunch the Committee over the next two years, declaring that “the real goal of developing efficient, modern communication is to pay attention to the media and to coordinate the EESC’s opinions with the political debate and the current institutional issues in the Member States”.

Finally, responding to a RAI journalist on the question of participatory democracy, Ms Rodrigues said that “participatory democracy is the right solution for tackling the challenges of globalisation”.

The day’s events gave us a glimpse into the future. One of Mr Sepi’s ambitions is to enable the European Economic and Social Committee to become an institutional partner that can give voice to what people on the ground think of the social impact of European policy measures.

This is a truly ambitious and worthwhile goal.