Counting the cost of stalled integration

Europe needs to have its Rooseveltian break with fear of political action. This will add a new freedom to the EU’s existing freedom from paralysis rooted in fear. At the EESC, we believe that one strong driver for overcoming fear in the EU is an objective evaluation of what we have. This does not only mean counting the successes of the Common Market, but also entails a general discussion of the social impact and added value of all the EU’s areas of action.

You never appreciate what you have until it’s lost

Let’s stop to think for a moment of the social, economic and environmental gains achieved through synergies between the Member States. And now let’s imagine that these successes had never happened, and consider the alternative scenario – the scenario of non-Europe. Lastly, let’s put a figure on this alternative scenario.

Why embark on such a complicated task of quantification? The answer is simple: one rarely appreciates what one has until it is lost. At the EESC, we believe that a realistic report needs to be drawn up, making it clear what the absence of the EU would mean today – in other words, quantifying the cost of non-Europe.

This idea has a clear precedent from 1988, when Italian economist Paolo Cechinelli carried out a study for the European Commission on the cost of non-Europe in relation to the single market, concluding that the removal of trade barriers would boost GDP by 4.5% to 7% and create 2 to 5 million jobs. This study played a decisive role in the implementation of economic and monetary union. The European Parliament and the Commission are now conducting similar studies with regard to the forthcoming Single Market Act II, an initiative which we applaud. However, after much thought and discussion about the “cost of non-Europe”, the EESC wishes to take things further.

Price tag on Europe unravelling

The three groups that comprise the Committee – Employers, Workers and Various Interests – have agreed that more is needed from these draft studies. We call for a quantitative analysis that evaluates what not belonging to the EU would really mean for the 500 million-plus inhabitants of the Member States. We must stop and think about what would happen if cohesion policy or common transport networks did not exist. Let’s forget the euro and return to national currencies and trade barriers, and stop adopting common positions on foreign policy. If we put figures on the scenarios in terms of unemployment, GDP or possible interest rates, we will discover that the scene would doubtless be disastrous indeed. So are we at the Committee proposing an exercise in scaremongering in order to shock people into believing us?

Nothing could be further from the truth. We simply want to reflect reality. And the reality of the current crisis is undeniably grim. Unemployment, social exclusion and the closures of small and medium-sized enterprises are more than enough reasons for the public to feel inevitably disillusioned with the authorities and individuals, which are starting to lose their credibility. Against this backdrop, and in the face of the protests occurring in many European countries, governments cannot simply look towards Brussels, shrinking their shoulders and dodging the issue. In a clear example of economies of scale, the pooling of resources by Member States means that every euro invested at European level has a greater economic and social impact for the public.

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Over the past year, a further 2 million Europeans have joined the jobs queue, as the economic crisis has pushed unemployment to record levels across the EU. This is a situation of profound concern to the European Economic and Social Committee.

The latest figures, for August 2012, show that unemployment rose for the 17th month in a row, by more than 50% in the euro area (10.5% in the EU-27). Nearly 23% of under-25s were out of work, rising to more than 35% in Spain and Greece. European political leaders have denounced the figures as “unacceptable”, and EU Employment Commissioner Andor has warned of the risk of “economic and social disaster” in the future, due to a “lost generation” of jobless youngsters.

The EESC has highlighted the impact of the jobs crisis on individuals, and how economic circumstances are damaging and complicating people’s lives, whether because they have lost their job, because they cannot find another, because they are forced to accept lower wages in order to get by, or because social security benefits have been slashed or withdrawn. While billion-euro bailouts have been spent on rescuing financial institutions that are partly responsible for the crisis, people in the worst affected countries are left to fend for themselves, leading to a severe loss of public confidence. Since the start of the downturn, the Committee has been warning of the dangers.

The EESC has called on the European Commission to impose swingeing cuts in investment to service their debts, forcing them to earmark huge sums because countries with high risk premiums have to seek protection, leading to a severe loss of public confidence. The EESC supports the Commission’s initiative. It also emphasises the need to adopt a practical roadmap that can start having an effect as quickly as possible.

The current crisis demonstrates that the model of fragmentation and national regulation is ineffective, which is why the EESC urges that powers be handed over to the European level in order to bring about uniform and effective supervision. This is the way to achieve effective European governance that is socially useful and economically efficient.

The roadmap towards a Banking Union

Since the onset of the banking crisis, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has advocated greater integration and harmonisation of the regulatory system governing European banks. With regard to the current negotiations on the Banking Union and the planned regulation to set up a European Supervisory Authority, the EESC supports the Committee’s initiative. It also emphasises the need to adopt a practical roadmap that can start having an effect as quickly as possible.

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Banking union will reverse the EU fragmentation

EESC info: The opinion on the Banking Union Package calls for the adoption of practical regulatory proposals to be adopted as soon as possible. What, briefly, would the short-term positive impact be?

Carlos Trias Pintó: The Banking Union will help stabilise the financial system, allowing the Member States and SMEs to obtain financing on reasonable terms. This is very apparent, because countries with high risk premiums have to earmark huge sums to service their debts, forcing them to impose swingeing cuts in investment, education and health. As well

EESC info: How do you see the Banking Union’s regulatory framework and its impact on the EU economy over the longer term?

In the medium and long term, the Banking Union will enable the present fragmentation of EU financial markets, which is currently hindering proper links between the real economy and the financial sector, to be reversed. Micro- and macro-prudential supervision will, in turn, ensure that we have a financial system that can rely on its own resources to withstand any future systemic crises.

EESC info: The negotiations at the Council revealed that fear being excluded when it comes to shaping the new regulations. What is your view on this?

Some Member States have used the “opt in” clause and are therefore set to come under the Single Supervisory Mechanism as they move towards adopting the single currency. Attractive ways must be provided for these countries to take part, on the same footing as euro area countries.

EESC info: We often hear warnings of fragmentation in the European banking sector, but what exactly does this threat mean?

Different rules apply to EU financial industry players depending on which country they come from and this means disparate markets, obstacles to links between them and difficulty in comparing products. The result is ongoing inefficiency, which affects both financial players and users and makes it particularly hard to achieve the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Single Market Act and the Small Business Act. (asp)

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Dear readers,

Every year, the European Economic and Social Committee’s Civil Society Prize turns the spotlight on organisations around Europe that are carrying out remarkable and innovative projects to promote society’s well-being and strengthen the voice of citizens in democratic decision-making.

The prize has a different theme each year and in 2012 it was a tough ask. We called for activities that promote sustainable production or consumption or generate green jobs in Europe.

I am very proud of our 2012 civil society prize winners. I was impressed by the creativity and the unique character of the three winning projects and by the social innovation thread conducive of energy in all their actions. They all have an educational aspect: they train people and communities to see the benefit of integrating the most vulnerable and needy, to be close to issues that can improve their day to day life (e.g. how to diminish their use of energy, how to bring the unemployed back in the economic cycle, how to understand that feeding properly is best for their health etc.).

Sustainability is not just about environmental issues, important as they are. It should be the principle underlying all other policy areas – economic, social and international. And it is particularly important to me personally. When I assumed the EESC presidency in 2010, I made “sustainability and social cohesion” one of my priorities. It is very exciting to see the work of so many people. I’m proud of what we manage to achieve, quite often with very meagre resources, and undoubtedly a very important boost to our way of thinking and operating.

The EESC has selected its winners for the 2012 Civil Society Prize. This year’s top award goes to the UK-based Transition Network, which supports community-led projects to meet the challenges of climate change, shrinking supplies of energy and resources and economic hardship.

Since 2008, its network of groups has grown globally from 100 to more than 1,000, extending not only across 23 European countries but also to Australia, Brazil and Canada.

“This is really wonderful news,” said Transition’s Funding Manager Nicola Hillary. “It is also great recognition for the work of so many people in hundreds of European local communities who are engaging their local civil society in developing low-carbon futures and livelihoods which promote well-being for all in the community. It is very exciting and inspiring to have been awarded first prize.”

Second place goes to the CAIS Association in Portugal, which helps people coping with homelessness and extreme poverty to become more autonomous and to help themselves, through ecologically friendly jobs such as recycling materials, ‘dry’ car washing and traditional shoe-shining.

“I’m so glad to know that our work has been positively appreciated,” commented Executive Director Henrique Pinto. “European recognition of what we manage to achieve, quite often with very meagre resources, is undoubtedly a very important boost to our way of thinking and operating.”

The third prize-winner is non-profit association Livstycket, based in the Stockholm suburb of Tensta, in Sweden. It promotes solidarity between Swedish society and the immigrants and refugees who come to the city, often to escape war or terrible hardship.

EESC President Stefan Nilsson, who was on the judging panel, welcomed the selection as “a balanced choice”.

“The strong European dimension of the Transition Network projects does justice to the overall objective of the prize, and the 2012 theme: ‘Innovate for a Sustainable Europe!’ The other two prize-winning organisations bring to the EESC Civil Society Prize a strong sense of what we care about in our Committee’s work: social innovation, social business, inclusion, integration of the most vulnerable and going local.”

An exacting task for the judges

She recognised that the very specific focus of this year’s theme – “Innovate for a Sustainable Europe!” – led to fewer nominations than in 2011. “But I think there were some very, very interesting nominations,” she added. “We could all agree that a number of the organisations submitted were outstanding in the kind of work they do, and the kind of projects they carry out.”

This year’s Civil Society Prize was not specifically connected to the 2013 Year of Citizens. “But the link is there because sustainability is also part of citizenship,” pointed out Ms Darmanin.

Next year, by contrast, the Year of Citizens is likely to have a major impact on the prize. “I expect the theme will be quite wide-ranging,” she predicted. “The Year will certainly raise the profile of the EESC and of civil society’s activities.”

Stefan Nilsson
President

Anna Maria Darmanin, Vice-president of the EESC

“Civil society already takes many bold initiatives, and the Civil Society Prize is there to acknowledge them,” explained EESC vice-president Anna Maria Darmanin. “Sometimes many of these are not specifically connected to the theme, and so this award aims to offer them the recognition they deserve.”

As a member of the judging panel, Ms Darmanin had to take some tough decisions. “It was difficult to choose the winners because there were a number of very good projects this year,” she said. “It’s very easy to be impressed by ideas on first reading. But in the end the shortlist was of a very high quality. I found it difficult to rank my first, second and third preferences. So I tried to weigh up their importance and come to a decision in that manner.”
The new European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) will help create a genuine dialogue with citizens and give Europeans the opportunity to shape laws directly, according to former EESC president Anne-Marie Sigmund.

Since the ECI came into force in April 2012, a number of groups have already taken up the challenge of launching initiatives on issues they feel strongly about.

The alienation that many people feel towards the Union has been recognised and well-documented in recent years. The EU has tried to raise awareness of the existing provisions for representative democracy, such as the direct election of European parliamentarians. However, the EESC’s work also involves promoting participatory democracy, encouraging EU citizens to take action for themselves.

The European Commission has, for years, involved citizens, social partners and other stakeholders in consultations on EU policies and laws, but now, for the first time, Europeans can propose legislation directly.

“The ECI is the first transnational tool for participatory democracy. It gives citizens some influence in setting the EU agenda and a sense of being involved,” explained Ms Sigmund.

After the committee has been set up and the initiative registered on the ECI website, the clock starts ticking, and supporters have a year to collect at least one million signatures from EU citizens in at least seven Member States.

“Collecting one million signatures from up to 27 Member States, speaking different languages, will be no easy task,” admitted Ms Sigmund.

Proposals that successfully garner the requisite number of signatures within the time limit are then passed on to the Commission, which must give a formal response outlining what action it recommends and the rationale behind it.

Although the Commission promises to make every effort to adopt ECIs, it is not obliged to do so. Any draft legislation will be handled under the normal law-making procedures.

The ECI has been a long time in the making. As far back as 1988, the European Parliament proposed the introduction of a citizen-led tool. But it was not until 2003 that a breakthrough came when, under intense pressure from civil society, the Convention on the Future of Europe included the ECI in what later became the Lisbon Treaty.

The EESC has been closely involved in the design and implementation of the ECI. “We supported the idea of a Citizens’ Initiative from the start and fought for a simple, understandable set of rules,” Ms Sigmund told EESC Info. “EESC opinions aimed to make the ECI as easily accessible to ordinary people as possible, through simple procedures, low thresholds, transparency, and so on.”

“Empowering European citizens to take the policy initiative is to establish a ‘social union’, argues Dr Erik Kurki, the EESC’s Rapporteur on Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship.

The good news is that efforts to weather the crisis and build a more durable Union seem to be paying dividends, and the EU’s image has, paradoxically, improved. At a time of social and economic crisis, and despite ongoing challenges, improved in the eyes of Europeans.

The string of global and regional economic crises that have plagued Europe in recent years – from the global sub-prime financial crisis to the eurozone sovereign debt crisis – has shaken citizens’ belief in the EU and its institutions.

Despite this encouraging evolution, there are still some troubling signs, such as the fact that the majority of Europeans (54%) believe that their voices do not count in the EU.

The fight against poverty and social exclusion is the top priority for EU citizens, the survey confirmed. The best way to achieve this is to build a ‘social union’ to ensure that fundamental social rights are maintained as the EU moves towards its Europe 2020 strategy ambitions of building smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Trade unions have been among the first to take advantage of the opportunity. Despite some technical problems in setting up a certified online collection system, the European Federation of Public Service Unions launched its campaign for universal access to water as a human right, in September. The online campaign gathered 1,500 signatures within half a day. In October, Fraternité 2020 became the first ECI to run its online collection, hosted temporarily by the EESC. It is demanding the enhancement of exchange programmes such as Erasmus and the European Voluntary Service, “in order to contribute to a united Europe based on solidarity.” By the end of November, there were 14 open initiatives on the ECI website.

The EESC’s role has not ended now that the ECI is in force. The Committee intends to organise an ECI day in spring 2013, to assess what further action it should take. And it will continue to act as a promoter and communicator on the importance of the initiative, a neutral facilitator of emerging ECIs, and a mentor to help the Commission evaluate proposals.

2013 will be the European Year of Citizens and the ECI is just one facet of crucial efforts to make the people of Europe feel they have a greater say in the future evolution of the EU.

Although it is early days to judge the success of the measure, and despite teething problems with the online system, Ms Sigmund is confident that ECIs can play a role in empowering citizens and, in turn, strengthening the Union. “This can be a great tool for enhancing and developing the European public sphere and creating a real dialogue of citizens,” she noted. “It is our strong belief that thoughtful and committed citizens can change the world.”

For more information, consult www.eesc.europa.eu/eci

EU needs a ‘social union’ to restore citizen confidence

The best way to restore people’s confidence in the European Union is to establish a ‘social union’, argues Leila Kurki, a Finnish member of the EESC Workers Group, and president of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship.

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“The ECI is the first transnational tool for participatory democracy. It gives citizens some influence in setting the EU agenda and a sense of being involved,” explained Ms Sigmund, who led the way in formulating the EESC’s position on the subject.

For the interested citizen, how exactly does this work? Who can put forward an initiative, and what kinds of legislation will be considered?

The proposed initiative must fall within an area where the Union has legislative power. Citizens cannot act alone: anyone who wishes to launch an ECI must first form a ‘citizens’ committee’ made up of at least seven individuals who are old enough to vote in European Parliament elections, residing in at least seven different Member States.

“It will require a lot of hard work, dedication and collaboration with like-minded citizens across Europe.”

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Despite this encouraging evolution, there are still some troubling signs, such as the fact that the majority of Europeans (54%) believe that their voices do not count in the EU.

The fight against poverty and social exclusion is the top priority for EU citizens, the survey confirmed. The best way to achieve this is to build a ‘social union’ to ensure that fundamental social rights are maintained as the EU moves towards its Europe 2020 strategy ambitions of building smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

“There is a need for a social union with fundamental social rights,” said Ms Kurki. “The lack of decisiveness in this area has led to a growing number of working poor, rising inequality, and an even greater fear for the future.”

Efforts to build a social union should rest on four main pillars: adapting to changes in the labour market through innovative work practices, creating quality jobs for young people, investing in growth to bolster confidence, and reinforcing the role of social and civil dialogue.

“Properly designed social and labour market policies are a positive force not only for social justice but also for overall economic performance and sustainable growth.”

Ms Kurki. “Now, more than ever, there is a need for close coop- eration between policy-makers and organised civil society at both national and EU levels. The focus must shift from markets to citizens,” she urged.
EESC Civil Society Prize: top award to Transition Network

The Transition Network was set up in 2007 to respond to the demand from local communities for advice on making their neighbourhoods more environmentally sustainable.

In January 2011 it launched the award-winning REconomy project, to help communities to set up new, green social enterprises, and adapt existing businesses to eco-friendly practices. In three areas of the UK: Totnes in Devon, Hereford, and Manchester, practical trials are under way to see what works best in developing a sustainable local economy. And there are plans for a revolving loan fund to encourage investment.

Transition also runs training projects for some 300 people a year, to help them launch successful transition initiatives, and has set up a global trainers’ network.

The Network’s Funding Manager Nicola Hillary welcomed the EESC award as recognition of the efforts of local communities. “We are really very honoured indeed,” she said, adding that half of the prize money will go to support the REconomy project, to develop more sustainable livelihoods, and the rest on sustaining Transition initiatives across Europe.

“Communities all over the place are emerging and responding to the challenges of the times with great resourcefulness and creativity,” declared Transition’s co-founder Rob Hopkins. “They are setting up new social enterprises, often based around making the community more resilient, low-carbon businesses, respecting natural limits, and localisation.”

More information:
http://www.transitionnetwork.org/
http://www.reconomyproject.org/

Swedish project aims for long-term integration of immigrant families

Livstycket, based in the Stockholm suburb of Tensta in Sweden, won third place in the EESC’s 2012 Civil Society Prize.

The association, which has 500 members, runs projects to help immigrant communities integrate into Swedish society. They are aimed particularly at women, through education and training.

The “We drink tea and learn the letter E” project has taught 16 previously illiterate women to read and write within a year and a half. Without literacy, believes the organisation, it is impossible for individuals to participate in a democratic society. “We want women to be aware that they have the capacity to develop, educate themselves and improve their lives. The opportunity to learn to read and write should be a human right.”

It has also launched international partnerships, educating and supporting women in Turkey and Uganda. “Our guiding principle has always been that change is possible,” explained Birgitta Nolof, who launched Livstycket in 1992. Women are crucial to sustainable change because they, in turn, help to educate and integrate their children.

One successful student rang her mother in Somalia in tears, to tell her of her achievements. “Today I can read, after more than 10 years living in Sweden,” rejoiced another.

Announcing the award, EESC President Staffan Nilsson drew attention to the association’s contribution to sustainable social inclusion and integration: “two vital elements of the EESC’s work.”

In 2011, the theme of the EESC Civil Society Prize was ‘Dialogue and participation for EU values integration, diversity, solidarity and tolerance’. EESCinfo caught up with last year’s award winners including Serbia, and the organisation has been campaigning this year for civil society to be allowed into migrant detention centres. “The prize helped us with our visibility, with access to institutions and to potential partners and supporters,” said co-president Nicolai Milanesio. “For that we are very grateful.”

More information:
http://www.livstycket.se/

EESC offers welcome support in difficult times

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More information:
http://www.livstycket.se/

Award goes to innovative job ideas in Portugal

The Civil Society Prize selection panel made its second award to the Portuguese organisation CAIS, based in Lisbon and Oporto, which works to help vulnerable people to become sustainably self-sufficient.

CAIS started 18 years ago, launching a monthly magazine that homeless or jobless people sell on the street to make the money they need to live on. Since then it has developed other projects, and in September started the innovative BuyAtWork scheme. Targeted at large companies, like Merck in Lisbon, it supplies the little services that staff do not have time for: everything from visiting the dry cleaners to picking up shopping.

“The idea is to expand this to other companies – there is a lot of potential,” said Executive Director Henrique Pinto. “Solidarity is not about giving charity. The best solidarity is the creation of real sustainable solutions that include training and work. It is through work that people can recover the dignity they deserve.”

Although we are a small organisation, we are a very relevant one,” he explained. “Since there is not much work out there at the moment, we are trying to invent our own jobs. Our focus is to help people to be independent.”

CAIS plans to spend the prize money either on developing new work opportunities, or to invest in its existing projects. “We are very proud and excited about this award,” added Mr Pinto.

More information:
http://www.cais.pt/
Crisis encourages labour mobility

Massive emigration of Romanians to the rest of the EU has affected its employment levels. And its exports are generally less expensive and more competitive compared to some of those pegged to the euro.

Meanwhile, infrastructure projects under way in Romania, partially funded by EU support, still require the know-how of specialised engineers and technicians.

The country received almost EUR 20 billion under the ‘convergence objective’ which targets regions characterised by low levels of GDP and employment. The full absorption of the funds could increase the country’s GDP by 1.8% every year, according to Prime Minister Victor Ponta.

A skills mismatch is creating opportunities for those struggling in countries like Spain.

Pursuing the rights of LGBT citizens

The EESC is pushing the European Commission to be more active in combating discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the workplace.

In September, an EESC draft opinion on the issue noted that both France and Sweden have implemented programmes to tackle discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The treatment of LGBT people in the workplace varies considerably between Member States, despite obliged should be integrated EU law to combat such discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The 2006 EU directive on equal treatment, for example, compiled into one legal text all previous laws and case-law related to gender equality in matters of employment and occupation.

The directive says the principle of equal treatment for men and women “cannot be confined to the prohibition of discrimination based on the fact that a person is of one or other sex.”

The fight against discrimination can help cement the feeling of belonging to the EU.

But in May, an analysis of Member State legislation and administrative practices on the protection of equal rights, conducted by the International Lesbian and Gay Association ILGA-Europe, uncovered vast differences.

The study found Malta, Greece, Cyprus, Italy and the Baltic States to be among the worst performers. The UK, Spain and Germany ranked as best, followed by Scandinavia.

Meanwhile, Spain’s constitutional court recently upheld a law that allows people of the same sex to marry, despite widespread opposition by the conservative Popular Party and the Catholic Church.

And France’s socialist-led government under Francois Hollande followed through with his campaign promise to table a bill to recognise same-sex marriage and child adoption by homosexual couples.

Such arrangements provide couples with legal and fiscal advantages, like access to family-related leave and dependents’ benefits and pension arrangements.

The EESC says that the fight against discrimination can help cement the feeling of belonging to the EU. Consequently, the European Year of Citizenship should focus on the diversity of society’s needs and the fight against discrimination and inequalities, notes the Committee’s opinion.
Helping the Roma to help themselves

More than 6 million Roma citizens live in the EU. If they all lived in one country, its population would exceed that of Denmark or Ireland. Roma have been living in Europe for over a thousand years, and their traditions, beliefs and custom are an integral part of European culture. Yet, in 2012, they are marginalised, discriminated against and face prejudice. The Committee has long spoken of Roma integration for decades, but very little has been made until now. Why?

The most vulnerable groups – Roma, immigrants and the homeless – are popular scapegoats; the EU cannot ignore this trend.

This opinion stems from a study carried out in the 27 Member States. What was the aim of the study, and what did you find?

The EESC commissioned a study on Roma participation by Roma organisations and/or NGOs in the development of NRIS. We found that the NRIS was greeted with scepticism by the Roma community. There is a growing frustration and distrust due to the lack of real improvement in integration and living conditions in recent years.

Should we conclude that the NRIS has failed?

I would say that this demonstrates that strategies are not enough. Success depends on implementation. The EU and the Member States must show that they can turn promises and policies into reality.

Has the current economic and social crisis caused further difficulties in terms of integrating Roma citizens?

Roma citizens are among those suffering the most from this crisis. Austere measures, high unemployment and cuts to welfare systems are fueling extremism. The most vulnerable groups – Roma, immigrants and the homeless – are popular scapegoats; the EU cannot ignore this trend. We should focus our efforts on strengthening social cohesion and reaffirming the basic values of European integration.

If you had to propose some immediate steps to address the problem, what would they be?

Firstly, we should stop treating Roma, most of whom are EU citizens, as a “minority to be protected” and immediately start guaranteeing them real equality with other EU citizens. Secondly, we should suggest establishing a comprehensive EU strategy, while drawing on examples of best practice at local level, in cooperation with Roma and civil society organisations. Roma must be involved in designing, implementing and monitoring any policy that affects them. Finally, I would ask Member States to show greater consistency between their formal commitments and the actual instruments and resources they put in place.

Would this be enough?

No, but it is a crucial starting point for a completely new approach. We need a cultural revolution in our relations with Roma. We have to create a truly inclusive and open society, free of prejudice. Differences have been and will be an asset of the EU. We can only overcome the current economic, social and democratic crisis by making a reality of the EU motto “united in diversity”.

Journey to the centre of the earth

Twelve members recently visited Finland’s largest ever civil construction project on the island of Olkiluoto. Equipped with emergency breathing apparatus, they went down into the Onkalo facility – which will be the world’s first deep geological nuclear waste repository.

Two nuclear power stations are already in operation on this small island off Finland’s west coast. A third, using the new European Pressurised Reactor (EPR) design, is under construction and a fourth is planned.

Members toured the construction site and were led to the heart of the reactor (the fuel rods are due to go into next year), past massive pressure vessels and into the vast turbine hall, currently an organised chaos of pipes, wires, temporary platforms, walkways and constant movement. Three thousand five hundred people from 40 different countries are working on the site. Five hundred metres away from the reactors lies the entrance to the underworld of Onkalo.

Active ageing

In order to give a clear signal that age should not be a barrier to participation at any level, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the opinion on the involvement and participation of older people in society at its November plenary session.

Although shadow banking is not subject to the same regulatory and prudential requirements as regular banking, public bodies have had to deal with the losses caused by its financial activities.

At the November plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on A strategy for e-procurement. The rapporteur, Edgardo Maria Iorio (Workers Group, Italy) said that in spite of EU efforts to promote procurement in Member States, some are reluctant to cooperate and open up the public procurement market to competition; the level of e-procurement remains very low in some countries.

This opinion provides an in-depth analysis of the state of play in the Member States. It offers practical solutions and an objective assessment of the Commission strategy for e-procurement. It is pointed out that e-procurement drives modernisation and innovation forwards while reducing market fragmentation. A full switch to web-based procurement could ensure significant savings. Administrations that have already switched to e-procurement have made savings of 20%. If e-procurement were applied to all procurements, savings would exceed EUR 100 billion. In addition, it would fully open up the procurement internal market – especially to SMEs. That is why the EESC will urge the European Commission to implement the transition to e-procurement by 2015.


Shadow banking

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At the November plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on Active ageing. Decision-makers must continue to develop emphasis on older people’s abilities and contribution, rather than focusing on their chronological age. The EESC called for greater solidarity and cooperation between generations, pointing to the untapped potential of an ageing population.

PLENARY SESSION IN A NUTSHELL

E-procurement

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First-day excitement never left me

arriving at the EESC for the first time?

Oliver Röpke: I knew the EESC before I became a member because I had attended various meetings held by the European Trade Union Confederation here. It was still exciting, however, to enter the Committee’s building for the first time as an EESC member. I met so many colleagues from so many countries, all together in one place, and I was suddenly part of that myself. The appeal of that has stayed with me right up to the present day.

Being a Member of the Committee means a lot of travelling and meetings outside Austria. Do you still have time for your friends and family?

I studied law in Vienna, and immediately went on to complete my year’s practical experience in court. I then specialised in labour law.

Why did you choose a career as a trade unionist?

I always wanted to combine my work with my political interests.

How long have you been a trade union member?

I have been involved with trade unions since I was a student.

What are your passions? How do you spend your free time?

I love going on weekend city trips and I enjoy football too. But now I only watch it on TV or go to occasional matches. I also enjoy my skiing holidays in a secluded guesthouse in the southern Tyrol mountains.

Where would you like to be in 10-15 years’ time? Would you like to be in Brussels or perhaps you dream of a far-distant village where you could read and write books?

I like Brussels and I like my job, and if I am here in 15 years’ time, I will be quite happy. Or when I think of it, why not in Portugal, somewhere along the Douro River where I could enjoy the beautiful landscape and delicious food? Although I think that after a few calm weeks without travelling, it might become too quiet for me!

The Single Market: 20 years on

The “one-in-one-out” idea, which stops authorities from introducing new regulations that are costly for business, should become the norm, was the conclusion reached by the participants in a conference “The Single Market 20 years on – What’s in it for the UK?” held on 5 November in London.

In a new series of interviews, Tomasz Jasiński, a Polish member of the EESC’s Workers Group and EESC members’ representative on the board of the EESC info newsletter speaks to his fellow members to find out what makes them tick. He recently met Oliver Röpke, an Austrian member of the EESC’s Workers Group and head of the Brussels Office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation. Here are some excerpts:

EESC info: Do you remember the 20th anniversary of the Single Market?

I am happy to remember the 20th anniversary of the Single Market, which takes account of stakeholder views. Here are some excerpts:

EESC info: What’s in it for the UK?

The EU is carrying out the “EUNAVFOR ATALANTA” military operation in an area covering the south of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the western part of the Indian Ocean. While this operation has managed to reduce the number of vessels attacked in that area, piracy can hardly be said to be under control. The fact is that, partly as a result of ATALANTA’s success, piracy is spreading to other areas where there is a much more limited naval presence, such as the Gulf of Guinea and the Strait of Malacca.

Piracy figures are high enough to justify a more vigorous approach by the EU. While acknowledging recent efforts, the EESC considers that further action is urgently needed to tackle this scourge.

To this end, Dr Anna Bred- uma, vice-president of the EESC’s Employers Group, was appointed rapporteur for an own-initiative opinion entitled “Maritime Piracy: Strengthening the EU response”, adopted by the December plenary session.

It would be wrong, of course, to believe that piracy can be eradicated by military means alone. The oceans are far too vast and resources too limited. Instead, a great deal of the solution lies on shore and requires a long-term commitment, namely in terms of capacity building (training of judges, establishment of courts, drafting of legislation, etc.) and securing better prospects for young people, so that honest employment is preferable to piracy. Piracy also involves huge financial flows related to corruption, theft and the illegal arms trade. Tracking down and stemming such flows is also a matter of urgency.

In short, there is no silver bullet when it comes to fighting piracy: it will take a multifaceted approach.

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In the same vein, impact assessment, which takes account of stakeholders views, is a pre-requisite for a regulatory framework that is fit for purpose, said those taking part in the event attended by Lord Brittan, former Vice-President of the European Commission, Stafan Nilsson, EESC President, Bryan Cassidy, President of the EESC Section for the Single Market and Michael Gibbons, Director of the UK Better Regulation Executive, to name but a few.

A heated discussion, in which a number of London-based stakeholders took part, heard calls for better communication on the benefits of the Single Market and the tools available for businesses and consumers active in the market.

A separate debate focussed on the digital single market, with many arguing for more interoperability and higher standards, together with greater attention to security and digital procurement procedures.

The event, which was part of a series of local activities marking the 20th anniversary of the Single Market, was organised by the Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom and the EESC Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption. (ipj)

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