Dear readers,

On 17 December 2007, a new cooperation agreement between the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) was signed by the presidents of the two institutions and their secretaries-general.

For those such as myself who have been closely involved in the negotiations, this agreement is an excellent example of a consensus. It should not be forgotten that the agreement is the outcome of months of political consultations and administrative negotiations between the two Consultative Committees, a process in which staff representatives played their part.

The main objective of the agreement is to boost the efficiency of the two Committees and to optimise cooperation, while at the same time respecting their autonomy. The first agreement was signed in 1999, following the provisions introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty. This agreement established the joint services of the two Committees. The aim was to enable the Committee of the Regions to acquire functional maturity and to encourage cooperation which would be mutually beneficial to both institutions. The CoR and the EESC thus entered upon a form of interinstitutional cooperation which was without precedent in the European Union. The joint services, which provide a real ‘production chain’ for the two Committees, particularly with regard to translation needs, currently employ some 700 officials, with a budget of EUR 38.5 million.

The new agreement took effect on 1 January 2008 and will run for a period of seven years. This means that until 2014, the two Committees will work closely to the Presidency and mentioned that four opinions have already been requested by Slovenian ministers.

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Mr Dimitris Dimitriadis, President of the EESC, warmly welcomed Ms Cotman, pointing out that Slovenia is the first country among all the new Member States to assume the Presidency of the Council. He also stressed that the EESC will work closely to the Presidency and mentioned that four opinions have already been requested by Slovenian ministers.

The EESC is celebrating its 50th anniversary! It was 50 years ago that the EESC was established to bring in new expertise to European decision-making and given sets of consultative powers. The idea of establishing the Economic and Social Committee was agreed two months before the Treaty of Rome was concluded in March 1957. It was brought on to the agenda by two of the smaller players in the negotiations, Belgium and the Netherlands. The first plenary session took place in Brussels on 19 May 1958. The Committee will mark its 50th anniversary on 28 May 2008. A special commemorative plenary session will be held, with former EESC presidents as well as young people in attendance. Former European Commission President Jacques Delors and other personalities will be invited to participate in a high-level panel discussion that will bring guests together to discuss genuinely future-oriented issues. The Committee will open its doors and engage in debate with the public, thus assuring its unique role of being a bridge between Europe and organised civil society. The Committee will listen to Europe: it must espouse a forward-looking vision and take up the major challenges it will have to deal with in the future, including the tremendous challenges facing Europe, public expectations and ways of making participatory democracy more responsive to grassroots concerns. The celebration will take place on 28 May 2008 in the EESC headquarters, which will be decorated for the occasion. The message is clear: the EESC is active!

All EESC communication events will be put under the umbrella of the 50th anniversary: Open Day on 7 June (the Committee will open its door to public for the fourth time), ‘Sail for Europe’ (the EESC will be the primary patron for the sailing vessel known as Traité de Rome), the EESC cultural programme, the prize for organised civil society, ‘Going local’ initiatives, etc. A historic DVD and book and a special edition of your EESC Info will be produced on this occasion.

In this issue

- Signing a memorandum of understanding between the EESC and the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation
- The EESC on animal health: ‘Next to prevention, the EU needs to develop international standards’ by Leif Nielsen
- whatNEXT? exhibition ‘Impressions of infinity — Images of Slovenia’

Dates for your diary

- 13 and 14 February 2008, EESC visit during the plenary session of a delegation from the Mercosur Economic and Social Consultative Forum (FCES), to commemorate the 10th anniversary of EESC-FCES relations.
Mr Dimitriadis speaks in Strasbourg before students of the ENA

On 15 January 2008, Mr Dimitriadis, EESC President, spoke at a conference organised in Strasbourg by the ENEA (the French national school of public administration) on the challenges facing the forthcoming French Presidency of the European Union, on a platform which included Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the Commission, Mr Blanchamaison, Secretary-General of the future French Presidency, and Michel Herbillon, Vice-Chairman of the French Parliament’s European Affairs Committee. Mr Dimitriadis was accompanied by Committee members Anne-Marie Sigmund and Agnès Cser.

The conference was chaired by Jean-Pierre Jouyet, French Secretary of State for European Affairs, and Alexander Vondrath, Czech Deputy Prime Minister. The German and Swedish foreign affairs ministers were also present.

The event, which was broadcast live on the Internet, brought together a significant number of decision-makers and representatives of national governments and institutions and was attended by two year groups from the ENA. The students were able to put questions to the

Signing a memorandum of understanding between the EESC and the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation

On 22 and 23 January 2008, Mr Dimitriadis, EESC President, visited Moscow to address the first plenary session of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation and sign a memorandum of understanding to enhance more structured cooperation between the two organisations. The memorandum of understanding stipulates establishment of relations based on regular cooperation between the EESC and the Public Chamber by exchange of information, specialists, experience and publications.

Mr Dimitriadis also met with Mr Dimitry Medvedev, the nominee for the post of President of Russia and currently First Deputy Prime Minister, as well as Mr Andrey Klimov, Member of the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma. Mr Dimitriadis participated in the work of the civic forum attended by 1 300 participants from all Russia.

In his speech he expressed the conviction

(Continued from page 1 — EESC plenary session)

order to bring the Treaty closer to the citizens), the successful implementation of the new three-year cycle of the Lisbon strategy, the tackling of energy and climate change issues, the enforcement of the EU perspective of the western Balkans, and the promotion of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008.

Apart from the five major priorities of the Slovenian Presidency, Mrs Cotman also referred to other challenges in the field of labour and social affairs that the Presidency wishes to deal with, such as the status of youth in the labour market, the response to demographic changes in face of the need for a new solidarity relationship between generations, and the provision of equal opportunities beyond sexual stereotypes.

The minister’s speech was followed by a lively questions and answers session where the Committee’s members had the chance to express their support but also their comments to the minister. Group I member Filip Hamro-Droz (Employers’ Group, Finland) emphasised the importance of the upcoming summits with Latin American countries and Russia, as well as the EESC’s work in strengthening cooperation with the western Balkans. Group II member Merita Roksandic (Employees’, Slovenia) pointed out the importance of the successful functioning of the labour market in the EU. Group III member Jahier Luca (Various Interests, Italy) commented on the Presidency’s first priority, the ratification of the Reform Treaty, mentioning that there is not much time until 2009 and that it is vital to have an open dialogue with citizens.
Next to prevention, the EU needs to develop international standards

by Leif Nielsen

Commission’s initiative to develop this new strategy, with its special focus on prevention. Being particularly concerned about the public health risks associated with the spreading of animal diseases, the Committee underlined the importance given that scientists have warned that a pandemic is likely to happen sometime in the future.

With a view to implementing the strategy and measuring its progress the opinion refers, as a first priority, to the development of operational and measurable indicators. A definition of an ‘acceptable level of risk’ is necessary.

Furthermore, while prioritising the application of precautionary measures, procedures for exit strategies following a crisis should also be established. The opinion recommends regionalised but harmonised criteria and a requirement for testing/quarantine arrangements.

The EESC considers it important that the Community aim at membership of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), as this would improve convergence with OIE standards. At the same time the EU could assist developing countries in bringing about a good understanding of EU legislation. Given increased risks resulting from long animal journeys (such as new transport routes to countries outside the EU, more contact with countries where conditions are unstable, the continued concentration of animal stocks in certain areas of the EU), the EESC feels there is a need to consider limiting the transport of live animals. Additionally, there is a need to introduce a harmonised framework for national co-funding while maintaining current veterinary funds, as well as promoting the transfer of knowledge and research findings with a special focus on prevention.

EESC demands economic, social and environmental sustainability criteria for biofuels

On Wednesday 23 January the European Commission adopted a directive on renewable energies as part of its overall 2008 energy-climate change package. The declared objectives of the directive are to put into legal practice a binding 20 % target of renewables and a 10 % binding target for biofuels. Commenting on the Commission’s proposal, two authors of recent EESC opinions on biofuels and related issues, Mr Edgardo Iozia (Group II—Employees, Italy) and Mr Derek Osborn (Group III—Various Interests, United Kingdom), insisted that, whilst they understood the logic of a 10 % by 2020 target as a way of concentrating minds and kick-starting a necessary re-think on energy sources, the target had to be kept under review. If not, there would be, in their opinion, a serious risk of the European Commission and the EU falling victim to the law of unintended consequences.

There are, argued Iozia and Osborn, a host of reasons for making haste slowly. Full and proper assessments should be carried out concerning the social, environmental and economic impact of the development of biofuels. Such assessments would need to look closely at the issue of potential competition of land use, particularly with regard to deforestation and the probable loss of biodiversity. They would also need to consider ethical and political issues such as food security and food-fuel competition, the geo-political consequences and potential adverse impacts on the developing world.

Mr Iozia, rapporteur of the Committee’s October 2007 opinion on the Commission’s biofuels progress report emphasised: ‘It is good that the European Commission has indeed included environmental sustainability criteria for the production of biofuels in its text. But that is not enough — already today we can see a steep increase in food prices on the world market, and food-fuel competition is one reason for this. Therefore, we also need enforceable criteria for the social and economic sustainability of a European biofuels policy.’

Said Iozia and Osborn: ‘The Commission must also consider seriously the potential technical difficulties for the automotive industry to attempt to respect a target of 10 % (for diesel, the current filters for particulate would not work efficiently, for example). ‘Due consideration,’ they continued, ‘would also need to be given to the risk that fuel companies might neglect improvements in energy efficiency in favour of a rapid expansion of biofuel production. Most importantly of all there is a very wide range of effectiveness of different biofuel projects in achieving reductions in carbon emissions and fears that these applications may have little or no carbon benefit.’

Mr Osborn, rapporteur of the Committee’s October 2007 opinion on reducing greenhouse gas emissions (road transport) argued that: ‘Nobody questions the European Commission’s commendable commitment to a more sustainable energy mix or its determination to take rapid action. It would be little short of tragic, however, if its current haste and concentration on the first generation of biofuels were to result in more, not less, environmental harm.’
EESC publications online

This year all EESC's publications are scheduled to be displayed online. The purpose is to make available to a wider audience the work undertaken by the Committee so far and inform them about what's in the pipeline for future publications. This is necessary not only for academia specialising in social research but also for public administrations in Member States seeking a European dimension to today's complex societal issues in a more reader-friendly and practical manner. Online display of EESC publications will purport to fulfil this necessity. EESC publications should be more widespread and more accessible. Cover images, summary 'blurb', linguistic versions available and information on how publications may be obtained will all be displayed online.

As with every jubilee, 2008 is a landmark for the Committee. It will be an opportunity to go local and let our visitors and guests know about it. This year's wide range of end-of-year products portrays the 50th anniversary logo, as do greetings cards and a whole series of promotional products. Table and pocket calendars, office wall posters and diaries, T-shirts and pens, bags and balloons, they are all stamped with the new logo.

whatNEXT? ‘Impressions of infinity — Images of Slovenia’

As part of the Slovenian Presidency and the European Economic and Social Committee’s cultural programme, on Wednesday 23 January 2008 Mr Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for Science and Research, opened the contemporary art exhibition ‘Impressions of infinity — Images of Slovenia’. He was introduced by Mr Cveto Stantić, Slovenian EESC member (Group I, Employers). The Commissioner highlighted the fact that the opening of the exhibition coincided with the launch of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. He also congratulated the EESC on its 50th anniversary, which will be celebrated in May 2008. In his speech, Mr Potočnik emphasised the key role of art in intercultural dialogue, on a par with that of science and technology, helping people to gain a better understanding of differences and to explore new ways of understanding the world.

Mr Gasper Dernšar, exhibition curator, and Ms Nadja Gramuš, art critic, then presented the items displayed in this major exhibition which brings together the works of artists from two different generations: young contemporary Slovenian artists — Gašper Jemec, Janez Janša, Alen Ožbolt — and living ‘icons’ of Slovenian art — Drago Tršar, Andrej Jemec, Janez Bešmik. The works convey the artists’ interpretations of what the future holds from a local and a global perspective.

Hosted in the EESC’s Jacques Delors building, the exhibition is open to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3 to 5 p.m. until 20 June 2008.

Dulevski wins second term in Bulgarian EESC

The Bulgarian National Assembly has re-elected Professor Lalko Dulevski as President of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council for a second four-year term. Professor Dulevski was first elected president of the EESC by the Parliament in September 2003. He stated in front of the Members of the Parliament that, in the coming years, the EESC should turn itself more towards civil society organisations and promote further the development of civil society. The Bulgarian EESC was established in 2001 and started functioning at the end of 2003 after a very fruitful collaboration with the EESC in the framework of the Joint Consultative Committee of EU–Bulgaria economic and social interest groups.

Change of guard: your new contact in the Commission

EESC members now have a new contact person at the European Commission: Mr Panayotis Anastopoulos has succeeded Mr Andrea Pierucci as head of the unit responsible for relations with the EESC at the Commission’s Secretariat-General. The EESC’s members thank Andrea for all his good work and candid cooperation with the Committee during recent years and express their warmest welcome to Panayotis, looking forward to close and fruitful cooperation.