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| **Civil Society Days 2017 – Opening session** |



The conference was opened by **Gabriella Civico** from the European Volunteer Centre. She welcomed the participants to this EESC's annual event dedicated to putting to practice Article 11 of the Treaty. She also explained that the theme for the 2017 edition: "The Europe we strive for" was chosen to give a sense of urgency for action in the critical times for Europe.

Her introduction was followed by a welcome from **Georges Dassis**, EESC president, who focused on some of the aspects of the conference to be discussed during the two days, namely the populism and civil society in the era of new technologies. He believed that 2017 had brought some optimistic messages, meaning the electoral results in The Netherlands, Austria, Germany and France which should give Europe strength for the necessary changes. He underlined that it was essential for Europe to protect its citizens and go back to its fundamental values if it did not want to give way to more populism. As regards the new technologies, he stated clearly that they constituted an enormous progress, but they should never be used with the objective to replace humans. Greater productivity, he said, must be evaluated against its fairness and a proper social policy should be put in place to create a political and social cohesion.

**Federica Mogherini**, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, delivered a keynote speech on the "Global Europe and its role in peace and stability". She began by reminding everyone that her professional career was rooted in the civil society, which gave her an extra perspective in her present office. She was convinced that institutions needed civil society to work properly. She agreed with Mr Dassis that the previous year had constituted probably the lowest point in the European history and everyone feared that Brexit would start a black series of exits. In 2017, we were still facing challenges, but there had been a real reaction to the situation as the EU citizens shifted from focusing on crisis to focusing on what was there to be lost if the EU had not been there. She talked about the "illusion of sovereignty", as she strongly believed that "the only way to be sovereign is to be together".

Ms Mogherini then moved on to talk about the progress on EU acting together for security and defence, which – she clarified – was not about the militarisation of the EU but having the economy of scale and a strategy for prevention, peace-keeping, sustainable security and multilateralism. She also noted that in 2016/2017, the EU had become a global actor much more visibly than ever before. She observed that many countries were turning to the EU as a reliable partner to uphold human rights, respect climate change agreements, to invest in humanitarian aid etc. She was convinced that it was due to the image of the EU as a predictable partner and strong actor in the world.

According to Ms Mogherini, there were a few things that the EU institutions and civil society organisations needed to do together. She declared that the EEAS supported the work of civil society in the EU and outside its borders especially that she was observing a shrinking space for civil society in many parts of the world. She saw the role of civil society as an inherent element of the EU policy and external cooperation, as it was her own conviction that no society was strong or stable if it was not based on an open and participatory society. She then gave a couple of positive examples about the Syrian civil society's great contribution to proposing possible practical solutions that the politicians might not know as they lacked civil society perspective.

Regarding migration, Ms Mogherini expressed satisfaction about the shift from simple "border management" to a more human dimension, which meant more focus on partnerships with the countries of origins and transit for saving lives, protecting people, fighting criminal activity, and promoting alternative economies. She was also pleased to notice that the climate change, economic injustice and uneven development in the world were put high on the UN agenda thanks to the EU's efforts and commitment. Finally, she appealed for help to abolish the "migration taboo" – Europe needs migration and internal mobility, she said. She proposed that the EESC elaborated an own-initiative opinion on the "cost of no migration" as a useful voice of civil society on this subject in order to build up awareness of the positive. It would open the way to another taboo subject of regular channels of migration. In response, Mr Dassis declared that he would take on board to work on such an opinion in the EESC.

Ms Mogherini finished by saying that, in her view, the EU institutions needed a strong partnership with civil society because the stronger the societies were, the stronger and more open were the institutions. Her speech was followed by a Q&A session in which participants asked specific questions on cooperation with civil society in Western Balkans (the participant would wish for more CSO involvement), migration (a plea for a different narrative about migration to give it a positive image and separate it from the issues of security) and existing examples of successful partnerships between the political authorities and civil society.

Ms Mogherini replied briefly by confirming that involving the civil society in the 6 Western Balkan countries, with which EEAS was working, was part of the work there and contributed greatly to transparency and a new approach to cooperation in the region. She also agreed about the need to be more optimistic about migration and to show that the intensity of migration was also connected with the EU's soft power in the world (wealth and stability, the respect of human rights, the rule of law etc.). She also warned everyone to be more responsible about the use of words, as no person was illegal, only the channels of arrival might be irregular. She also stressed that the word "crisis" should not be abused in the context of refugees – Europe was not in crisis because of migration, it was migrants and refugees who were leaving crisis behind in their countries to arrive to Europe. She also exemplified the successful partnership between authorities and civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the EU had seen a positive change in areas such as water resources management and climatic change. The key to the successful cooperation was specifically targeted agreements with small local communities.

**Renate Weber**, member of the European Parliament, Vice-chair of the EMPL Committee, focused her intervention on populism. She thought that populism constituted a great threat as it pretended to be a democratic way of policy making but often offered no solutions to real problems. We were societies vulnerable to populism because what had started in 2008 as an economic crisis had evolved into a social crisis inequality, fear of technology being in favour of rich people, fear of migrants taking over "our" jobs and then into an identity crisis.

According to Ms Weber, the populism was penetrating where politicians were making promises that they could not keep (that is raising expectations with societies but not delivering). According to some opinions, the populism was healthy for societies but Ms Weber believed that it should be fought, and in particular the way manipulation and false information were used these days.

She observed that some proposals from the Commission that the European Parliament was working upon were showing signs of populism as they were including objectives or standards that were too high or unrealistic. Touching upon too many elements or in too many policy areas could lead to the rise of populism. Instead, the Commission should be more pragmatic and focus on job creation and a wise allocation of funds between the EU and its Member States.

She finished by saying that the NGOs in Europe needed to be protected as they were watchdogs of the European democracy. She pleaded the European Commission to make funds available for the NGOs which fight against fake news and populism.

In the following Q&A session, the following remarks were voiced / questions were asked:

* We should not be isolating populist but talking to them, as they are an element of democracy and the purpose is not to create exclusive, but inclusive societies in Europe. Populists are also EU citizens.
* We should find the reasons why populism resonates with citizens. Is populism bigger on an EU or national level? Is the institutional setup to be blamed? Or should we rather appeal to citizens to participate more in the political life.
* Austerity programmes should not be imposed on those communities in the EU who are already under pressure of national governments (unemployment zones etc.)
* The extreme Right is on the rise and is aiming to undermine the European project. The way to fight it is to fight for the right causes.
* The anti-European wave is on the rise in the EU overseas territories, who feel detached from the continental Europe, as no one seems to be paying attention to their problems of unemployment and poverty – there is little attention or solutions coming from the EU level.
* An example of good practice to bring citizens closer to the EU institutions came from the north of France, where local civil society organisations proposed to citizens meetings with foreign citizens living in France / ambassadors presenting their country / non-French deputies. The organisers observed that it had a greater impact when EU matters or questions of migration were presented by non-natives living in France. An invitation was extended to Mr Dassis to participate in one of such sessions, to which Mr Dassis responded positively and asked only to coordinate with his Cabinet for the convenient date.

In her reply, **Ms Weber** stressed that EU was a project of European citizens and not the politicians. The European and national leaders had failed and this was why we were faced with three types of crises (economic, social and identity). She was convinced that EU needed a profound and fundamental reform of its overly bureaucratic institutions. She also thought that the proposals from Juncker's White Paper were exactly the kind of ideas that would divide Europe and that the principle value in the EU should be the respect of every Member State; the lack of it was particularly striking in the way the Commission handled the refugees' situation.

The opening session also included brief presentations of the **recommendations from EU high-school students** who participated in the EESC's annual project "Your Europe Your Say" for Europe@60. The recommendations were to:

1. Reduce food waste to help the impoverished and promote sustainability
2. Combat nationalism through interactive education and an internationally agreed history curriculum
3. Increase political interest in Europe by tapping the potential of social media and education, introducing attractive content (e.g. animations) and a Europe day for schools

Finally, **Adam Nyman** from Friends of Europe highlighted some questions from the online forum "Debating Europe: Can the EU survive populism?," which was moderated specifically before the Civil Society Days 2017. The questions were answered by, among others, FVP Frans Timmermans.

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| **Civil society days 2017 – Closing session** |

The two days of discussions, workshops and debate concluded on 27th of June in the afternoon. The closing session started with responses from the workshop organisers, linking to workshop results. Speakers were **Gerald Hensel** founder of Fearless Democracy, **Jean-Eric Paquet** Deputy Secretary General at European Commission, **Evelyne Gebhardt,** Vice-President of the European Parliament, and **Conny Reuter,** President of the Liaison Group.

**Gerald Hensel** is the founder of fearlessdemocracy.org, whose purpose is to fight against populism on social media. Fearless Democracy was founded in April 2017 in Germany and organises reactions against hostile attacks on internet. Fake news and hate messages on Internet play a crucial role in the attempt to erode civil society and democracy. As reaction, he wants to use the same tools against populists and extremists, and consider himself as a partner of public institutions, journalism and general public. For instance, many websites which disseminate fake news are financed by advertising banners. Then, Fearless Democracy uses social media to inform companies about the reality of the websites where they appear, and to invite them to withdraw their financing to this fake news websites. The most important threat for democracy is fear. Social media must also be used in a positive way, to reaffirm democracy and its values.

**Jean-Eric Paquet** presents three main points for the European Commission. First, the Commission launched the future of European Union debate with the publication of the White Paper in March 2017. He gladly takes note that the Civil Society Days intends to feed this reflection conveying the point of view of civil society. Second, the Commission recalls the importance of information to citizens and public consultation in the better regulation agenda. Third, Mr Paquet confirms that the European Citizens Initiative's Directive will be renewed in order to be more citizens friendly.

**Evelyne Gebhardt**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, points out the responsibility for politicians to defend real political positions, and what they really believe in, instead of running behind all electors. Populism is a loose of information. We must encourage citizen not to believe in all what they find on internet and we must tend to, and fight for, a society based on tolerance and discussion. Thanks to European Union, we have not faced to war since 1945. Statistically, on the basis of what has happened before the start of the EU project, we should have had three wars in this period.

**Conny Reuter** recalls that, 25 years ago, we wanted to created networks of civil society. The challenge today is how to have an impact in the Members States, and how to inform the European citizens about what happens in Brussels. Hate often starts at school, between children and between young people, and continue on social media. There are politicians who take advantage from this hate. The NGOs must keep far from hate and fight it. Thanks to the Civil Society Days 2017, we have a new vision for the European Union, summed up in the recommendations worked out by the workshops which constitute the input of CSDs and the contribution of civil society to reflection launched on the future of Europe. It's important to keep a dialogue between civil society, EESC, Commission and Parliament.

The floor is given to the chairs of the six workshops, who give the recommendations elaborated during the two days.

The assembly **adopts the 6 key recommendation and civil society commitments of the conference.**