At the start of this new season we are confronted with many changes, not least a new European Commission: a gender-balanced team of three executive vice-presidents, five vice-presidents and 18 commissioners. We will of course follow their parliamentary hearings very closely.

To support this new Commission, we are preparing a strong contribution to the 2020 Work Programme, which will propose political priorities for its mandate from a civil society viewpoint. To no-one’s surprise, we are pushing for the environment to be high on the agenda.

Indeed, the summer has shown us that the environment is one of the most important problems facing the globe - and Europe. Heatwaves, fires, storms - no-one can ignore the urgency of taking action.

And as everything is linked, we have to make an effort to develop external cooperation and aid, especially with hotspots in Africa, to tackle the migration issue.

Many decisions will be taken this year, and many of those will relate to living conditions in civil society and the way Europe is developing.

For now, populist forces continue to threaten Europe’s political class. But if Europe manages to regain the trust of its citizens, it can reclaim its title to be the greatest universal peace project in the modern world.

One thing is clear: to achieve this we need to accept our own role in the close dialogue with organised civil society in Europe and beyond, continuing our efforts to use concrete facts to show that the EU brings added-value to people in our countries and to organised civil society.

I wish all my readers a pleasant return to work after the summer, and let me know how you like the new look of our new magazine!

Arno METZLER
President of the Diversity Europe Group
News from the Diversity Europe Group

Debate on the EESC’s policies on disability

During our last Group meeting held on 17 July, our members Mr Vardakastanis, Ms Anča, Mr Pater, but also Ms Zvolska, member of the Employers’ Group, presented their contributions regarding disability rights.

Mr Vardakastanis explained the steps made by the Diversity Europe Group on disability rights both internally in the EESC and externally to EU institutions, DPOs, civil society and challenges ahead. He highlighted that members should do their best in implementing the Agenda 2030 on these issues.

Their work “unites them”, as Ms Zvolska said, which is why their initiatives were so successful. Covering different fields, such as employers, workers and other representatives of civil society gives them the opportunity to gain a large public and make their voices heard. Moreover, she tabled the plan of action of the Disability Rights Study Group, which will focus on hearings and country visits covering different aspects of life such as employment, social services, living in rural areas concerning individuals with disabilities.

Ms Anča gave comments on the development of her opinion related to women with disabilities. She also noted that speaking of women with disabilities was not usual when tackling gender equality strategy and that it was crucial to include these issues within measures towards gender equality: “It’s time now not only to talk about people with disabilities, but also about women with disabilities”, she noted.

Furthermore, Mr Pater presented the information report released on the right to vote and its main conclusions on technical barriers, deprivation of right to participate in EP elections and on the lack of voting independence.
At the last July Plenary session, Co-president of the Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks, Conny Reuter, took part in a debate with the Members of the EESC on the results of the Civil Society Days. He presented the conclusions and the recommendations of the 2019 Civil Society Days, highlighting the importance of sustainable democracy. Furthermore, he noted the key role of the Liaison Group, which was established with the aim to facilitate a dialogue between EU institutions and the European network of civil society organisations at the EU level. He drew attention to the recommendations, which were divided in two chapters, “For a participatory democracy” and “For a sustainable Europe: climate-neutral and green, fair and social, strong and economically vibrant.”

During the debate, four of our members took the floor: Mr Roirant, Mr Boland, Mr Sibian and Mr Di Fazio.

Mr Roirant explained that there is still room for improvement in the area of fluidity and that confusion and overlaps should be avoided. Furthermore, he expressed his content and support regarding the Liaison Group.

Vice-President Séamus Boland expressed his support for the Liaison Group and highlighted the need for civil society to be consulted, “we need to go out there and talk to them”, he said. By “not listening to the Civil Society, we allow a vacuum to develop and we allow the voices that we may disagree with, dominate a debate which they shouldn’t” he noted.

Mr Sibian raised awareness to the importance of young people that contributed to the Civil Society Days, who came up with valuable recommendations, which could become the starting point for future own-initiative opinions in the EESC. He especially pointed out to the importance that young people placed on the relation between technology and civil engagement, which should also be taken into consideration within the EESC.

Mr Di Fazio stressed the importance of defending democracy, urging concerns regarding the Italian Economic and Social Committee which could be under threat because of populism. Furthermore, he congratulated President Jahier, for defending this body.
GROUP III MEMBERS in the spotlight playing a key role

EU – China Relations

**Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)**
President of the REX Section
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EU-China Civil Society Roundtable held its 17th meeting in Shanghai on 11 and 12 July. A delegation of the EESC - including Diversity Europe President Arno Metzler and President of the REX Section Dilyana Slavova - and its Chinese counterpart, the CESC, gathered to discuss key topics.

The focus of the discussions was on digital revolution and its impact on society, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

In the margins of the Round Table meeting, a tripartite seminar - open to other stakeholders and civil society representatives – was held on the topic of Urban culture in relation to scientific and technological innovations.

The Round Table resulted in a Joint Statement, collecting the main conclusions as well as the way forward for both parties. This statement can be found here: [https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/17th-meeting-eu-china-round-table/joint-declarations](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/17th-meeting-eu-china-round-table/joint-declarations)

Both sides also agreed that the 18th meeting of the China-EU Round Table will be held in July 2020 in Berlin, Germany.

**EU – China Relations: The Way Forward?**

**Arno METZLER (DE)**
President of the Diversity Europe Group
**Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)**
President of the REX Section
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

EU - China relations have always been intensive, filled with hopes and disappointments, tensions and achievements. Today the European and Chinese models remain key components of our multipolar world, often in contradiction but bound by the imperative of cooperation and coexistence.

Nowadays China can no longer be regarded as a developing country or as an emerging power. It is an economic leader, a key global actor and a technological power. But leadership means responsibility! Its increasing presence in the world, including in Europe, should be accompanied not only by greater responsibilities but as well as greater reciprocity, non-discrimination, transparency, legal certainty and openness of its system.

In line with the 2016 EU strategy for China – the EU’s engagement with China should be flexible, ‘principled, practical and pragmatic, staying true to its interests and values’. It also important the principles of level playing field and fair competition to be strengthened across all areas of cooperation.

The EU and its member states have concerns about China. Those concerns include market openness and reciprocity, fair competition and the outsize role of the Chinese state and the Communist Party in China’s economy, security risks to critical infrastructure, authoritarian politics, human rights, Beijing’s political influence abroad and, in particular, China’s growing technological prowess.

GROUP III MEMBERS coordinating the work on new opinions

**Tommaso Di Fazio (IT)** is the rapporteur for the study group for the opinion “Integrated national energy and climate plans” – TEN/700

**Pasi Moisio (FI)** is the president for the study group for the opinion “Evaluation on Trans-European Network – Transport (TEN-T) guidelines 2013-2020” – TEN/701
Nonetheless that nowadays the EU and China have disagreements on a number of issues, at the same time they have common challenges to tackle and a wider range of opportunities to explore. Both are committed to a rules-based order, an open world economy, while also standing against trade protectionism and unilateralism. There is need to strengthen cooperation on global governance, connectivity, reform of the WTO, commitments to climate change and clean energy, to upholding multilateralism (rejection of unilateralism and protectionism).

What else is needed in the EU trade relations with China?

In order to protect Europe against unfair practices, Europe must be “much better in defining and protecting our interests”. EU institutions, member states and economic players need new economic guidelines/strategy to protect European interests beyond its borders. This should include a new industrial strategy, an update of the competition rules, a more robust trade policy, tackling innovations and technologies.

Perhaps it is an interesting idea to explore in depth the German proposal to create European champions able to compete with Chinese firms. German minister of economy, Peter Altmaier, suggested earlier this year that there should be a broader approach to competition regulation in order for European companies to remain competitive abroad. Many member states are in favour of updating the rules in the face of competition from the China’s state-backed companies. The problem is not that China is a tech leader, we have to accept it. What is problematic is that Beijing not always plays by the rules, including in terms of public subsidies.

Regarding US – China trade war, we like to expect the EU to play the role of a mediator between the two sides and in any case to avoid getting dragged into a US-China confrontation. At the same time the EU should have allies especially after the United States’ departure from multilateral approaches in both trade and climate and at the intent to impose more tariffs on Europe.

We are counting on China to deliver on its promise to open up its market. It’s high time for Chinese to understand that the time to act is now, and that further proponents have negative results.

North Rhine-Westphalia Liberal Professions visiting the EESC

On 28 and 29 August, a delegation representing the liberal professions of North Rhine-Westphalia attended a series of talks in Brussels regarding the state of play of liberal professions.

Taking advantage of their passage in Brussels, the Group met with high level representatives to discuss topics related to liberal professions, such as the European Charter of the liberal professions, and more specific issues such as the EU perspective on tax consulting professions.

The visit included a meeting at the European Economic and Social with Diversity Europe President Arno Metzler, who gave an overview of the role of liberal professions in European civil society, today and in the future, with special reflections to the work outlines of the Balkans, Africa, Caribbean, Pacific and developing countries, and to the EU-China round table.

Skills and competences acquired in civil society organisations - how to recognise and value them in the labour market

Krzysztof PATER (PL)
Polish Scouting and Guiding Association
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

In the center: Bernd Zimmer, Chairman of the Board of VFB, Verband Freier Berufe

The Labour Market Observatory in the EESC and the Committee for Public Benefit of Poland have organised a Joint conference “Skills and competences acquired in civil society organisations -
how to recognise and value them in the labour market". The Conference took place on 10 July in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland.

The conference, which was attended by more than 120 participants, including Polish government officials, has focused on the skills and competencies acquired by people who are active in civil society organisations. Speakers and participants tried to answer the question on how these people (especially young people) can demonstrate these skills and experience so that they can be easier and better included on the labour market. The conference has also focused on the active role of civil society organisations as training institutions – as they offer various types of training not only for their members but also for people from outside who are interested in gaining very specific qualifications.

**Pact for Impact**

*Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)*
Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

On 10 and 11 July, the International Pact for Impact Conference was held in Paris (France) to place the social and inclusive economy at the heart of the international agenda.

During the Pact for Impact Summit I had the opportunity to be a speaker in the workshop entitled "Which institutional framework for Social and Inclusive Economy?".

The primary goal of social economy is above all the search for growth without leaving anyone behind, without producing any waste.

The ability to be pro-active in social enterprises has not been studied enough and often researchers and economists have highlighted how social enterprises and especially cooperatives are "resilient". I believe that the theory of resilience does not offer the entire explanation for this phenomenon, since the fundamental function of social enterprises consists of making local communities and people active, being able to solve problems that concern them. The direct activation and the active implication of economic protagonism allows a greater durability of our society and the territorial economic models.

Moreover, the presence of social enterprises are a factor of sustainability to local economies: there are many examples of social enterprises playing an important role as agents of local development.

The ability to contribute should be supported, both with regulatory policies such as public tenders: from this point of view, the Directive on public tenders and Concessions of 2014 is a positive and clear example that foresees the possibility of social clauses and contracts or project appeals reserved for companies that employ disadvantaged individuals.

The other public policy that is very useful for supporting social enterprises is fiscal leverage, with facilitation and simplification mechanisms.

This does not only mean reducing taxes or waiving taxes for the state, as what seems lost on the one hand can be dramatically increased by savings and efficiency to reduce the cost for absenteeism.

We must increasingly imagine a Europe capable of involving all citizens at all stages of the life cycle by playing a leading role in building a sense of well-being. A sense that can be found in its subsidiary organizational forms: cooperatives and social enterprises, foundations, associations, mutual societies and voluntary work. All foundations on which we can rebuild the European pillar of social rights.
GROUP III MEMBERS in the spotlight playing a key role

Sustainable Trade and Tourism – A Global Agenda for Sustainable Development

Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)
President of the REX Section
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

On 22 and 23 August, I participated in an event in Tunisia entitled ‘International trade and tourism: a global sustainable development agenda – External aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce economic migration, with a special focus on Africa’, together with Group President Arno Metzler.

The first day of the conference tackled “International Trade and Tourism – A Global Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

- Tourism has an important impact on job creation, especially for women and youth in both urban and rural communities.
- One out of every eleven jobs worldwide is linked - directly or indirectly - to tourism.
- This sector also offers a wide diversity of investment opportunities for innovative SMEs and micro businesses.

The second part of the conference was dedicated to external aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce economic migration. One key initiative in this context is the EU External Investment Plan adopted in 2017. This plan aims to boost investment in the EU’s partner countries in Africa and in the European Neighbourhood. In this way, it combats the root causes for economic migration and encourages significant public and private investments. These investments should sustain economic and social development, with a particular focus on decent job creation.

I was delighted to organize this conference in Tunisia, as I am convinced that sustainable tourism is key to reducing youth unemployment and to increasing the participation of women in the labour market.

Hearing on the impact of the digital market on SMEs

Ronny LANNOO (BE)
UNIZO organisation of SMEs & independent professionals
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

In preparation for the opinion INT / 823 on the impact of the digital single market for SMEs, in a number of member countries, the study group is organizing, at the request of rapporteur Pedro Almeida Freire, hearings with stakeholders in the presence of the members of the Study Group. Elzbieta Szadzinska, Norbert Geisen and Ronny Lanno are part of the group. The first hearing took place in Belgium on 18 July. In the first part of the meeting Belgian and European organizations of SMEs and Retail, catering industry, and tourism, publishers and book stores, press products, insurance, drome, diamond, pharmacy. The second part focused on the European sectoral organizations, the other selected countries will follow starting September.

Third Age Forum in Nowy Sącz, Poland

On 4 and 7 September, 2 Group members participated in the 11th Forum of the Third Age in Krynica and Nowy Sącz in the framework of the Economic Forum: Renate HEINISCH, and Krzysztof BALON.

Renate HEINISCH (DE)
Federal Association of German Senior Citizens’ Organisations
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

This year’s edition of the Third Age Forum was unique, as extraordinary guests had accepted the invitation to participate in this international conference related to the XXIX Economic Forum. Representatives from the most significant opinion-forming European senior organizations and public institutions, influencing social policy at the European level and the shape of the silver economy, today and tomorrow, participated in the conference.
In her intervention, Mrs Heinisch discussed the necessary health prevention. Indeed, maintaining the activity as long as possible affects not only the aging process but also its quality.

Krzysztof BALON (PL)
Secretary of the Programming Committee of the Working Community of Associations of Social Organisations (WRZOS)
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

Another special guests of the 11th Forum of the Third Age in Krynica and Nowy Sącz was Krzysztof Balon, Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group. His keynote speech during the inauguration of the Third Age Forum on 4 September 2019, was dedicated to the subject “Rights of the elderly: access to basic services as a challenge for European policy and an essential element of social justice”. According to the EESC opinion on a better implementation of the Social Pillar, promoting essential services (TEN/692), of which Krzysztof Balon was a co-rapporteur, citizens have the right to benefits included in the European Pillar of Social Rights, such as access to culture and education, long-term care, health care, child and senior care, access to other essential services. Social justice should not exclude anyone and ensure equal access to all basic services. Their lack may even require compensation.

This situation is a challenge for European policy and requires common actions or even regulation as soon as possible. The EESC Group III Vice-President also cited the notion of social justice and gave intergenerational justice as an example. Elderly people have made a great contribution to creating both material and intangible assets, taking care not only of themselves but also of the interests of future generations. Seniors should consider young people as their spiritual heirs, and they should feel responsibility towards the outgoing generation - it will build intergenerational integration.

REX meeting in Geneva

Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)
President of the REX Section
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

On 5 July, Group III Members Ms Slavova, Mr Tiainen, Mr Bryan and Mr Sipko took part in a REX delegation meeting in Geneva.

They met with Director-General of the World Trade Organization Mr Roberto Azevêdo in order to discuss the reform of the WTO and further steps ahead in multilateral negotiations and inclusive economic governance.

As President of the REX Section, Ms Slavova underlined two main objectives of this meeting: promoting the role of organized civil society in the multilateral trading system and promoting the EU considerable experience in consulting and involving civil society in trade policy.

Structured dialogue is of outmost importance in trade agreements. In the specific case of plurilateral and multilateral negotiations, there should be guarantees that organized civil society can effectively participate at every stage of the negotiations, as well as during implementation. The EU experience of active participation of civil society should be promoted with other WTO Members in order to make proposals on the most suitable mechanisms that could be put in place at multilateral level. WTO members should be committed to more ambitious and systemic changes related to the labour standards, and fight against the climate and global SDGs in order to adapt the rules of international trade to the global challenges.

Educational visit

Renate HEINISCH (DE)
Federal Association of German Senior Citizens’ Organisations
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

On 9 July I welcomed a group of visitors at the European Economic and Social Committee. The group was composed of the director and the teachers of a vocational school who took part in discussions on topics related to education.
INT/880 - Blockchain and distributed ledger technology as an ideal infrastructure for the social economy (own-initiative opinion)

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)
Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
• supports the activities proposed by the European Commission to develop a European Blockchain Partnership, starting with the EU Blockchain Observatory and Forum.
• would encourage the institutions to facilitate the involvement of civil society organisations in the Observatory and European Blockchain Partnership
• believes that social economy organisations can help promote greater and informed awareness of the potential of blockchain, with the aim of maintaining a high level of transparency and involving all Europeans in the development that these new technologies may bring about

INT/882 - The role of consumers in the circular economy

Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES)
Representative of the Spanish Council of Consumers and Users
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
• is calling for a strategic shift – at European, national and local level – to unequivocally promote new models of circularity, not only by stepping up the alignment of all actors, but also by placing consumers at the center of public policy
• insists on using indicators that are reliable, comparable and verifiable, and stresses in particular the importance of monitoring indicators relating to chemical substances, including how they are handled
• also calls for voluntary labelling, as a step towards mandatory labelling, provided it is based on independent, verified voluntary environmental excellence schemes

INT/881 - Fostering an entrepreneurship and innovation-friendly single market – promoting new business models to address societal challenges and transitions

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)
Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
• recognizes the need to pursue a social market economy, which, while making smart use of new technologies, manages to address the major challenges relating to sustainability, climate change and reducing inequalities
• notes the need to recognise and support the role that SMEs, family businesses, social economy enterprises, craft businesses, small traders and farmers play in promoting and spreading entrepreneurial spirit focused on the role of people and local communities, thereby helping to build the European model of an inclusive single market

ECO/491 - Taxation – qualified majority voting

Mihai Ivaşcu (RO)
Adviser to the president of the Romanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
• supports the Commission’s ambition to kick-start a necessary debate, given the sensitivities of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in tax matters
• considers that taxation policy in general and combating tax fraud in particular must remain a priority policy area for the upcoming European Commission
• highlights – and welcomes – the progress made at EU level in the fight against aggressive tax planning and tax evasion, and in improving the value-added tax (VAT) system

ECO/495 - The European Semester and cohesion policy – Towards a new European strategy post-2020

Etele BARÁTH (HU)
Meritus professor at Budapest Corvinus University
Former Minister of European Affairs
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
• notes that a strengthened Semester process, without losing sight of its original objectives, should be the most important element of economic policy coordination
• stresses that the new Europe 2030 Strategy has to build a feasible bridge between local, regional and national targets and the objectives of a better-connected Europe
• proposes that the renewed system of European governance based on the EU 2030 Strategy should focus more on results and set fewer priorities, facilitating
Everybody is aware that the battery is one of the crucial components for new cars that are based on AI and robotics technology. As a key item on the list of assembly vehicle parts, it may determine the location of manufacturers’ production and assembly plants.

Those members of the public who are interested in the automotive industry are not generally aware of the situation in Europe. We are therefore concerned by the rather disconcerting and overly bureaucratic coordination and management of this issue on the part of the Commission, both during and after the critical period in the era of globalisation when considerable expertise and millions of jobs were lost due to the relocation of manufacturers.

The silence surrounding the origins of battery raw materials and the design, manufacture and supply chain of this critical item is generating great concern among those working in the automotive industry.

Considering the particular importance of the battery industry, it is crucial that the Commission familiarises itself fully with the status of the supply chain for this critical item, together with the supply chain of its raw material, and ensures that these are duly addressed by the relevant suppliers and that the manufacturers and other stakeholders are reassured.

Europe persistently lags behind its major competitors (USA, China, Japan) in this field. This issue needs to be addressed in a way that enables Europe not only to bridge the gap but also to go beyond it.

In my view, European civil society should accept nothing less.
Civil Society Europe (CSE) is the coordination for civil society organisations in Europe. First established as an informal alliance at the end of the European Year of Citizens 2014, it became in 2016 a registered organisation, and it has its headquarter in Brussels. It has gradually expanded to include the most representative NGO platforms in the area of citizens’ engagement, transparency and governance, social rights, education, culture, youth, the environment, animal rights, health, non-discrimination and international cooperation.

Nowadays, CSE gathers 29 biggest European thematic networks present in all of the EU member states and beyond. CSE is an independent voice promoting a space for structured civil dialogue and citizen’s participation at all levels in Europe, contributing to the recognition and support for independent and value-driven civil society organisations as the foundation of democracy. Thanks to its member CSE is in permanent contact with around 10 000 citizens which give it a vast possibility of mobilisation and cooperation.

CSE has been instrumental in raising the issue of a shrinking civic space on the EU agenda thanks to the publication of surveys, statements and reports on civic space in Europe, and through key meetings with EU institutions. CSE is also monitoring closely the impact of EU legislation on civic space, such as for example on fighting money laundering and financing of terrorism.

CSE has also contributed to the debate within the European Parliament on the transparency of EU funding to NGOs, including the European Court of Auditors special report and Council resolution, as well as EESC report on the financing by the EU of civil society organisations. CSE has participated in the review of the financial regulations of the European Commission. Main outcomes have been the recognition of volunteers work, a step forward in terms of simplification, and a full exemption for not for profit organisations from the no-profit rule. It has also contributed to the decision making process for the rights and values programme within the next Multiannual financial framework.

CSE is also raising awareness on reinforcing structured civil dialogue. It has engaged with the European Institutions on this matter at their highest level as well as with the European Ombudsman.

Carlotta Besozzi
Coordinator
Civil Society Europe