International trade now stands at a crossroads. New developments are challenging the global economy, such as the rise of new emerging economies, the progress of the digital economy, the structural imbalances that mark global trade, a lack of empowerment, the boosting of global value chains and the universally agreed United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

It is clear the trading system is in crisis and that urgent action and ambitious reform are needed to revitalise its central body, the World Trade Organization (WTO). Another important issue is to get countries, especially the US, to accept that disagreements on trade should be solved within the WTO's rule-based dispute settlement framework, not by unilateral action and intimidation. The deadlock regarding the Appellate Body should be resolved without unnecessary delay.

Since it was established in December 1994, the WTO has played the threefold role of economic shock absorber, driver of the internationalisation of developing countries' economies and facilitator of the establishment of global value chains. The WTO is the core of multilateralism in trade, which has led to a number of developments: a process of world trade liberalisation, greater transparency on trade policy measures, and the case-law of the Dispute Settlement Body. As a result of these successes, the WTO has welcomed an increasing number of members (now standing at 164), won important geopolitical players such as China and Russia round to the principles of multilateralism, and facilitated the integration of vulnerable economies – such as Liberia and Cambodia – into world trade.

Calls for WTO reform have intensified in recent months. Given the new circumstances, the WTO really needs to adapt its rules appropriately. Its future depends on it reforming. This must come from its members and be based on renewed multilateral dialogue in both developed and developing nations. Dialogue is also needed to resolve conflicts.

The WTO serves as a place where trade policy issues are addressed, disputes arbitrated, and legal frameworks devised and enforced. In this way, the WTO guarantees that trade policy rules are based on fairness, reasonableness and reciprocity rather than national interest. It is now more important than ever to have international trade governed by clear and transparent rules.

There are a number of different scenarios for WTO reform. In all cases, however, common ground should be found. What is needed first is a consolidated agenda for modernising the organisation. An absolute priority for all WTO member states should be to agree to conduct trade relations on the basis of multilateral rules, not unilateral action and intimidation, and to continue to engage with the US. The rules of non-discrimination, transparency, fair competition and an independent dispute settlement system could benefit everyone and serve as the solid base on which workable solutions can be found.

WTO reform could bring clearer and more transparent trade with China. Its modernisation will give China the opportunity to be part of the debate on “making economic globalisation more open, inclusive, balanced and beneficial to all”, as Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in April. China needs to take further liberalisation measures – in particular by joining the WTO’s government public procurement agreement, which will open up digitally enabled trade in services, and by committing itself to reciprocal treatment for foreign investors.

What should certainly be agreed on is to recognise the importance of ensuring effective monitoring and transparency in the WTO and to work seriously on tangible solutions. Bilateral trade agreements on many levels have shown the practical value of bringing civil society on board.
At a conference held in cooperation with the Vorarlberg Chamber of Labour in Feldkirch, Austria, on 11 October 2018, the EESC’s Diversity Europe Group took stock of:

- the state of play of populism in the EU, analysed how and why it had emerged
- the key role that civil society needs to play in fighting it
- the relevance of education, employment and economic progress in combating it

The event brought together EESC members and Austrian representatives of civil society organisations as well around 100 students from the local dual training institutes to discuss the main outcomes of the study on “Societies outside Metropolis: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism”, commissioned by the Diversity Europe Group.

One of the findings of the study is that despite the positive rating of national economy, in the richer non-metropolitan Austrian region Klagenfurt-Villach Populist Party voters are less optimistic about the prospects for the national economy and more Eurosceptic than other voters.

There is no doubt that economic decline and social instability are very important to explaining the increased support for populists in Europe. However, they constitute only one of many factors. In wealthy European regions, economic decline and social instability cannot explain support for populism. So we must also look to other problems for answers. There are other crucial factors which have directly influenced voters.

We are facing a very complex situation which requires multiple solutions. And if we return to the question of our conference today, what can cure EU-scepticism, the answer is: Only delivery of reasonable, responsible, pro-European solutions of the problems at EU level as well as at regional level could persuade EU citizens that the EU as such is the only alternative for common, peaceful European future.

Ultimately, our greatest hope to overcome populism lies in our own democratic system. Specifically, in our civil society, which can help prevent and limit the appeal of populist parties at home. For populism and EU-scepticism will have to be fought, at all levels: regional, national and European levels. In this, each and every one of us has our responsibilities. We must focus our energy towards communicating and defending the EU’s achievements and its positive impact on citizen’s daily lives. We should combat misinformation and disinformation on Europe and emphasise the tangible benefits of tolerance, plurality and inclusion.

We as members of the EESC have a double responsibility. To step up our activities linking the European and national levels. To strengthen national and European networks. We must also engage in an open informative discussion on populism and EU-scepticism within our own house, the EESC.

The EU as a whole must also actively listen and engage in dialogue, not only speaking at citizens. Many citizens feel that they are not being heard by the EU. They also feel that they have been forced to accept common EU policies that they do not want, such as the free movement of persons. Clearly, EU policies should be much more responsive to proposals by citizens and civil society, giving them a reason to be involved and encouraging bottom-up participation. Localities, cities and regions in particular should develop a common European purpose. Both EESC and CoR have to face these new challenges.

What must be made clear is that nobody is asking citizens to abandon their cultural, regional nor national identities. Europe is about our regions. It is about openness. It is about diversity. This is also why we decided to change the name of our Group to “Diversity Europe”: Nonetheless, I think that we have now realised that the EU should have paid more attention to forging a European identity with national roots. We have built “Europe” – now let’s build “Europeans”! European Irish, European Croats, European Poles! However, for this we need a definite bottom-up approach. Where citizens themselves ask for more integration, instead of the bureaucrats.
The European Union has been under fire since 2008, the year of the financial crisis. The “migration crisis” in 2015 further piled on the pressure, with Brexit forming the absolute nadir. What is more, it encouraged a number of populist parties to further step up their “my country first” discourse. The central theme of our group conference in Feldkirch, Austria – “Can economic progress and social stability cure EU scepticism?” – was therefore highly topical.

It was a very interactive meeting with a large number of young Austrians in the room. Among other things, several members of our group gave outstanding presentations focusing on Europe’s achievements and on practical remedies for the future. These are also very realistic building blocks for our own Committee’s priorities, looking towards the forthcoming European elections, and for the new Commission.

I myself had the privilege of taking part in a panel discussing what role civil society organisations can and should play in combating Euroscepticism.

One obvious initial solution is to put more of an emphasis on the EU’s achievements, but that is easier said than done. Over seventy years after the Second World War, it seems that peace, open European internal borders and living in the most prosperous part of the world are things that the younger generation take for granted; that is certainly the case for young people living in the EU’s “old” Member States. At the same time, many of our fellow Committee members know from experience what it is like to live under a regime where freedom of expression, freedom of movement, socioeconomic prosperity and democracy still needed to be fought for – and, indeed, civil society organisations played a key role in the success of that fight.

That is why a stable future for Europe and for European people and businesses is inconceivable without that same key involvement from civil society. Some parties and politicians advocate what they call direct democracy, without “inconvenient barriers thrown up by organised civil society”. Experience, however, conflicts with this idea, as shown for example by the chaos following the Brexit referendum. Social reality is, after all, more complicated than just a “yes” or “no” answer. The solutions are never black and white: they are always nuanced, always a compromise based on objective facts and figures, knowledge of the issue and respect for other opinions. Organised representative civil society needs to be a manifestation of that, but of course it needs to play an appropriate, contemporary role in the process: it needs to be democratic, close to the people, with both feet on the ground, using substantiated information, education and actions to speak for its own constituency while also being open to discussion and dialogue with government and with other partners in society. That also means reaching agreements and balanced compromises. To that end, the organisations concerned must, in any democracy worthy of the name, be able to count on, and lay claim to, the necessary resources, support and respect from the public authorities. Moreover, that does not exclude new, well-organised citizens’ movements – quite the contrary. More than ever, our Committee can and must continue to play a leading role, not only in Brussels but also, above all, on the ground in the Member States, respecting diversity but focusing on what unites us as Europeans and makes us stronger. The remedy for the future is still the right dose of more, not less, Europe. The vast majority of the young people present in Feldkirch were in firm agreement, as was evident from the vote by show of hands. And they, after all, are the future of Europe.
I can speak on behalf of all Members of the Diversity Europe Group who attended the extraordinary meeting of our Group in Luxembourg and state that our meetings with the European Investment Bank (EIB) and Eurostat on 14 November, were a great success! Meeting in the EIB room where the Investment Plan for Europe was invented, during the course of the day I realised that we have more in common with the EIB than a 60 year-long history. Not only were both the EESC and the EIB established in 1958. We also both share a deep commitment to a sustainable, innovative and productive EU which actively listens to and supports the real economy and its multitude of actors.

For our Group, the meetings in Luxembourg took place within the framework of better communicating Europe to citizens and civil society. We went to Luxembourg and met with the EIB and Eurostat, in order to acquire the solid facts and information necessary to explain the benefits of EU membership to our national and regional organisations, as well as to our fellow citizens. Moreover, as stated by the President of the EIB, Mr Hoyer, who honoured us with his participation: “For a good balance in the EU, what you stand for is key!”.

Without doubt, what we as civil society representatives learnt, is that the EIB has played a pivotal role in the collective European efforts to stimulate growth, following the global economic and financial crisis. The positive catalytic effect of the Investment Plan for Europe has significantly exceeded expectations and constitutes an important success story for the EU and the EIB. Focussing on environmental, infrastructure, innovation and SME support, the EIB lends to more than 150 countries, but concentrates 90% of its loans on projects within the EU. 10% is spent on global projects, mainly servicing the sustainable development goals and other political objectives.

Crucially, the Investment Plan for Europe will be extended in the future, with a target of mobilising 500 billion Euros by 2020 within the EU. Hence, the potential for partnership between the EIB and the EESC is considerable, notably with the Diversity Europe Group which represents the sectors which are prioritised within the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). Indeed, I look forward to future collaboration between our Group and the EIB in the future.

The second part of our extraordinary meeting concentrated on exchanges with Eurostat, notably regarding their work on big data and quality of life indicators. I am certain that my colleagues will agree that we learnt a great deal, particularly in relation to the principles and importance of qualitative data. Clearly, official, reliable and comparable statistics have a pivotal role to play in our democracies. By ensuring that both citizens and our democratic institutions have access to credible and qualitative information, it is possible to inform policy, to anticipate future societal challenges and to innovate. However, such a forward looking approach requires a mind change. I am certain that Eurostat will provide a positive contribution in this direction.

Although the EESC has not been active on the topic of Big Data, over the years we have been engaged in the debate ‘Beyond GDP’. Both with a Committee Opinion in 2012 and a high level conference by our own Group in 2014.

Personally, I believe that this work is crucial to us as Europeans. Measuring and valuing indicators beyond GDP, allows us to take a holistic and integrated approach to policy making. It allows us to make target setting relevant to the real concerns and needs of citizens. There is no doubt that investing in quality of life indicators are investments which will create employment, drive social cohesion and enable sustainable growth in the near future. The question of course is how to persuade governments to take the leap and to shift away from ‘production-oriented’ measurements.

What is certain in speaking both about big data and quality of life indicators, is that ‘business as usual’ cannot continue and that the solutions can only come bottom-up, directly involving civil society organisations. In this respect, there is also great potential for future constructive cooperation between Eurostat and the Diversity Europe Group. 
On the 27th of November (from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m), the EESC Liberal Professions Category hosted an event entitled Liberal Professions 4.0.: Sustainable Transformation of Professional Features. The event aimed to gain fresh insight regarding a future-proof definition of the liberal professions in a digitalised professional world – definition already endorsed last year in Rome with the manifesto of liberal professions at European level.

The meeting was opened by the President of the Diversity Europe Group, Arno Metzler.

In their capacity as spokespersons of the category and in line with the manifesto, Mrs Calderone and Mr. Kolbe presented respectively a summary of achievements and forthcoming action, entitled From Rome to Brussels and the way forward taking stock of the main outcomes of the conference.

After the event, President Metzler, Spokespersons Calderone and Kolbe met with European Parliament President Antonio TAJANI. They jointly discussed the next steps to make sure that liberal professions fully unfold their potential and thus improve the competitiveness of EU economy and competitiveness.

The event brought together representatives of the liberal professions at national and European level, as well as academic and institutional experts on the topic, with discussions divided into three thematic panels:

- Moving away from the cliché of ‘protectionism’ and adapting the definition of ‘public interest’ to societal developments
- Does digitalisation change the essential needs of mankind and how does this affect the liberal professions?
- Restrictions on equity participation: no longer required or more necessary than ever? Investor interests vs. Professional requirements.

More information on the manifesto: https://europa.eu/!Mr98JU
More information on the Liberal Professions Conference in Rome: https://europa.eu/lyC87VK
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OCTOBER PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Baiba MILTOVIČA (LV) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Single Market Communication” – INT/876

Alain COHEUR (BE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Social economy enterprises’ contribution to a more cohesive and democratic Europe” – INT/875

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The future of cohesion policy” – ECO/484

Marina YANNAKOUDAKIS (EL) is the Rapporteur General of the study group for the opinion on: “Protection of personal data in the context of EP elections” – SOC/613

Ionuţ SIBIAN (RO) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “European Philanthropy: an untapped potential” – SOC/611

Pavel TRANTINA (CZ) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Education about the European Union: its functioning, positive achievements and concrete benefits for citizens” – SOC/612

Mindaugas MACIULEVIČIUS (LT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Communication updating the 2012 Bio-economy Strategy” – NAT/758

Toni VIDAN (HR) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Strategy for long-term EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction” – SC/051

Mihai IVĂSCU (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The Future of the EU: Benefits to citizens and respect for European values” – SC/052

Debate with Mrs MOGHERINI, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission

Debate with Mr Christos STYLIANIDES, European Commissioner, responsible for Humanitarian Aid & Crisis Management

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/new-works-october-2018
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

Rudolf KOLBE (AT)
Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions
Co-Spokesperson Liberal Professions’ Category
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Rudolf Kolbe, a civilian surveyor who has been working in Schwertberg since 1986, was elected President of the Federal Chamber of Civil Engineers.

However, Rudolf Kolbe, the former Vice President of the Federal Chamber, now represents not just the almost 9,000 architects and civil engineers in Austria. He also brings tremendous experience in professional representation on an international level. Since 2015, he has been President of the European Free Professions Council. Rudolf Kolbe is also a member of the European Economic and Social Committee. It will be filled with 350 members nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council of the European Union. They are independent of instructions and carry out their work in the interest of all EU citizens. They have a consultative role in EU policy development and legislation.

In his inaugural speech, Kolbe emphasizes the importance of the chambers: “The balance of interests within the professional groups, which the chamber system allows us to do, can by no means be underestimated. If the chambers did not exist, it would be replaced by the Anglo-Saxon lobbying system, which only favors the financially stronger members.”

Thierry LIBAERT (FR)
Fondation Nicolas Hulot pour la Nature et l’Homme
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Plenary Assembly of 16 October

A few months from a critical stage for the future of the European Union, and with Europe struggling to give satisfactory answers to citizens facing a succession of crises and beset by doubts, the Hauts-de-France Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) met at the seat of the Pas-de-Calais department in Arras on 16 October 2018 for a plenary session devoted to the future of the Union.

Assisted in its deliberations by some highly experienced experts in European matters – Gilles Pargueaux MEP, EESC member Thierry Libaert, academic Stéphane Bracq from Lille’s Institute of Political Studies, and Vincent Richez, the region’s Deputy Director General in charge of European and International Affairs –, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council explored the foundations of Europe, the values that have united and can still unite its millions of inhabitants and the place and role of civil society organisations in European unification and renewal.

In two roundtables, the ESEC and its guests delved more specifically into the question of citizenship in tomorrow’s Europe and the notion of solidarity among citizens, regions and countries within the Union.

On the same morning, and in response to official referrals from the region’s president, Xavier Bertrand, the ESEC adopted two opinions – the first on the criteria for calculating operating allocations for local secondary schools (EPLE) for 2019, the second on Amending Decision no 1 to the original 2018 budget of the Hauts-de-France regional council.

More information on the European Justice Stakeholders Forum:
http://www.ejsf.eu/

The opinions adopted by the Hauts-de-France ESEC on 18 October 2018 can be found at:
Opinion on EPLE allocations:
**Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role**

**KINGA JOO (HU)**  
National Association of Large Families  
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**European Citizen’s Prize**

People and organisations from across EU came to the European Parliament on 9 October for the Citizen’s Prize award ceremony in recognition of their contributions to Europe.

The European Citizen’s Prize is given every year to projects and initiatives that contribute to European cooperation and the promotion of common values. After having received medals in ceremonies in their own countries, the laureates gathered in Brussels for a central award ceremony.

This year’s winners include 50 people and organisations from 26 EU countries, among them the National Association of Large Families in Hungary (NOE), the delegating organization of Kinga Joó.

NOE received the prize in the “citizenship category” for its more than 30 years of contribution to the well-being of families. The association, with 12,000 member families, is one of the largest civil society organizations in Hungary, providing services in the area of legal and social assistance, advocacy, etc. while also being active on the international scene.

**Baiba MILTOVIČA (LV)**  
Latvian National Association for Consumer Protection  
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

**Europe’s “New Deal” legislative proposal - the consumer’s view**

Baiba Miltovicā (EESC, Diversity, Europe Group Vice-president) was participant of panel session 1 “Europe’s “New Deal” legislative proposal - the consumer’s view” at the Council of European Energy Regulators (CEER) Customer Conference on Thursday, 29 November 2018. This year the focus was on “Digitalisation: opportunities and how to avoid risks for consumers”.

CEER in cooperation with European Commission DG DG Justice and Consumers revealed the most important issues of the “New Deal for Consumers” legislative proposals and on how digitization and smart technology enables consumers to be more engaged. Consumers must be aware of the existing possibilities and empowered to actively engage. Panel participants explored the disputable topics of comparison tools and bundled offers, misleading marketing practices, hidden advertising in search results. It was stated that price comparison tools for consumers should include fundamental features of commercial offers, including bundled services or products.

For the full list of winners please see:  

**Arno METZLER (DE)**  
President of the Diversity Europe Group

**EESC supports dissemination of IBA Rule of Law videos**

On 6 November, I attended the Brussels launch of the IBA Rule of Law videos, which took place during the event What makes for a healthy democracy? at the European Parliament.

Details of the event can be found on the IBA website here www.ibanet.org/Conferences/What-makes-for-a-healthy-democracy.aspx.

A new International Bar Association (IBA) initiative that aims, through a series of short videos, to engage the global populace on the importance of protecting and promoting the rule of law was recently presented at the European Parliament.

Against a backdrop of multiple countries across the world facing threats to the rule of law, the eight videos, each around a minute in duration, depict examples of how everyday freedoms and rights are being disregarded, with courts muzzled, political officials bribed and human rights violated.

The IBA is working to stem the diminishing of the rule of law; however, this requires cognisance of what is taking place. The videos, which show how our lives are affected when the different elements that make up the rule of law are flouted, aim to initiate much needed public discussion about the state of democracy, inequality, corruption and governance. To this end, the IBA and the EESC encourage anyone who views the videos to share them with family, friends and contacts in their professional networks and beyond (for example, in schools), and to request that they in turn do the same.

More information about CEER Customer Conference:  

The Look after the Rule of Law, and it will look after you videos can be viewed and downloaded from the IBA website here:  
Eastern Partnership

President of the Eastern Neighbours Follow-up Committee of the European Economic and Social Committee Indrė Vareikytė represented EESC at high-level ministerial meeting with the EU Member States and six Eastern Partners, all of them present at ministerial level, but also in the presence of civil society, the Parliaments, local and regional authorities, our investment banks.

The members of the meeting re-committed to the Eastern Partnership as such - bilateral cooperation and also in the multilateral framework; discussed preparation for the 10 years of the Eastern Partnership in 2019 and implementation of the 20 deliverables for 2020.

According to Indrė Vareikytė the participants of the meeting accords great importance to civil society. This means that there is a high degree of recognition of the crucial role that civil society plays in democratisation, conflict resolution and development processes, both in the EU and in the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood. Meanwhile EESC remains convinced that better involvement of organisations other than NGOs – such as social partners, farmers, consumers, SMEs, cooperatives, etc. – would greatly enrich such dialogue.

“The EU’s policy towards the Eastern Neighbours must not be ambiguous, as this could lead to geopolitical destabilisation by other players. A strong, secure and prosperous neighbourhood means a strong, secure and prosperous European Union” - stated Indrė Vareikytė in her speech to participants of the meeting.

New Deal for Consumers
Les assises des consommateurs

On 28th November, 2018 Consumer Summit “New Deal for Consumers – Les assises des consommateurs” co-organised by the EESC and the European Commission brought together the expertise of representatives from the Civil Society, National Authorities, Academia as well as consumer and business organizations and citizens. Baiba Miltovica (EESC, Diversity Europe Group Vice-president) was participant of the panel “Future priorities for European Consumer protection” representing the civil society perspective.

Individual consumers hesitate to take action when their rights have been breached, as the procedures to obtain redress or compensation may be costly and lengthy, not always worth the effort especially if the damage is small.

It is indeed truth, that consumer organizations need representative actions! These procedures are already the case in some Member States, while now with the New Deal proposal this protection will be extended to all consumers across the EU. Well functioning collective actions should be in place in MS where there are not such procedures while we should avoid any unrealistic provisions which could restrict consumers organizations unreasonably. New Deal proposal provisions provides that qualified entity can launch representative action for: an injunction order as an interim or definitive measure (establishing the infringement); redress measures: compensation, repair, replacement, contract termination. Furthermore, redress actions must be based on a final decision establishing an infringement; there are provided choice for Member States regarding opt-in/opt-out; settlements encouraged (need approval of court/authority); full transparency about the source of funding. With the New Deal for Consumers, even if consumers do not realize that there was a breach of their rights, a qualified entity can bring a representative action to stop the illegal practice and seek redress for the consumers affected.

More information:

The GSEF is an international network which brings together local governments and civil society stakeholders committed to supporting the development of the Social Economy. It pursues creation of quality jobs, fair growth, progress in grassroots democracy and sustainable development. Values such as human dignity and sustainable ecology are the principles intended to underpin every activity of the GSEF.

The fourth (2018) GSEF took place from 1 to 3 October in Bilbao (Spain) and brought together over 1 400 government representatives, leaders, experts and Social Economy businesses from 80 countries. In addition to plenary sessions held during the mornings, the programme included workshops dealing with topics as diverse as socio-occupational inclusion, entrepreneurship, business change, reinforcing synergies, public policy and education from the perspective of the Social Economy.

Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna, member of Group III and observer in the UNTFSE, moderated at a workshop on THE SOCIAL ECONOMY IN THE OBJECTIVES OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

Four countries on three different continents were represented at this workshop, and this, together with the wide range of issues raised by the panellists (climate and food sovereignty, empowerment and capacity-building for people with disabilities through sport with a view to inclusive development, food distribution and sustainable development, and how ethical finance contributes to the SDGs), helped to provide an overview of the differing geographical perspectives on how the Social Economy contributes to the sustainable development goals in different fields. These interactive workshops invited all to contribute, and generated very interesting discussions aimed at sharing perspectives and experiences and continuing to move towards an inclusive, egalitarian, people-centred society through quality job creation, fair growth and sustainable development.

National Conference of Family Movements

On Tuesday, October 16 the National Conference of Family Movements took place at the Economic and Social Council in Paris.

The central theme of this day was “The representation of civil society.”
At its Plenary session on 17-18 October 2018 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

**Krzysztof BALON (PL)**
Poland Working Community of Associations of Social Organisations
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

The EESC:
- welcomes the proposal for the ESF+ to improve merge funds and simplify procedures;
- is however highly critical of a financial cut in EU cohesion policy, and, as regards the ESF+, of the 6% decrease of the funding allocated to it;
- does not agree either with the elimination of the minimum share (currently set at 23.1%) of cohesion policy funding under the ESF+;
- disagrees with the proposal of reducing the European co-funding rate of the ESF+;
- calls for 30% of total resources for economic, social and territorial cohesion policies to be allocated to the ESF+, and, within the ESF+, for 30% of resources to be earmarked for social inclusion measures;
- strongly recommends avoiding strict conditionalities that are not in the interest of the beneficiaries.

**Imse SPRAGG NILSSON (SE)**
National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**SOC/602 - Erasmus+**

The EESC welcomes the next Erasmus programme’s objective to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and competences needed to face social and economic challenges and to focus primarily on young European citizens;
- suggests that the name “Erasmus+” be retained, as it symbolises the fact that all the programmes are contained under one umbrella;
- also welcomes the proposal to double the programme’s budget, but calls for it to be tripled, which would show a deeper commitment to the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in order to ensure real inclusiveness and access for all. A higher budget should be combined with greater flexibility and responsibility at national level.

**Michael MCLoughlin (IE)**
Youth Work Ireland
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**SOC/603 - European Solidarity Corps**

The EESC welcomes the commitment to the renewed European Solidarity Corps (ESC) with an increased budget and target for participation. It appreciates the merging with the EU Aid Volunteers.

The committee considers that in the future, the EU needs to develop two independent support programmes, one for youth and one for volunteering, while accepting there will be some overlap.

The Committee considers that the employment strand needs to be subject to strict regulation and regular review to ensure commitments made in relation to it are met and that the ESC should be restricted to the not for profit sector.

Consistent with a lifelong learning approach, there should be no age restriction on the ESC.

**Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES)**
Asociación de Usuarios de la Comunicación (AUC)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**INT/867 - Taking of evidence and service of documents in civil or commercial matters**

The EESC welcomes the Commission’s proposals to amend the Taking of Evidence Regulation and the Service of Documents Regulation and calls on the Commission to take into account its observations: without a genuine judicial area, the freedoms of the single market cannot be fully taken advantage of.
The EESC hopes that the EU will promote international anti-fraud cooperation, so as to develop an effective and coordinated response to activities that now go beyond state and even continental borders; to this end, effective methods of global cooperation between the relevant authorities need to be developed.

The EESC recommends that the Commission make sufficient investment in the new anti-fraud technologies, starting with artificial intelligence, which could deliver significant improvements that would facilitate the efforts to combat these illegal activities.

These investments must be accompanied by proper training for public authority staff involved in the fight against fraud.

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### Fully-funded, strong

#CommonAgriculturalPolicy is essential

Published in EU Reporter Correspondent | October 29, 2018

We believe a fully-funded, strong Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is essential and rejects any cuts to the CAP budget. We also welcome the legislative proposals on the CAP, with the new focus on increased environmental and climate change ambition, subsidiarity and simplification.

While welcoming the greater freedom, that new proposals on subsidiarity would give individual member states, we are keen to ensure that the CAP remains a common policy with a strong single market.

The EU agriculture and farming sector is essential for ensuring Europe’s food security and self-sufficiency and meeting the growing demand for high-quality food. This great responsibility farmers and food producers have towards European citizens requires continued EU support, from a strong CAP with sufficient funds.

### No cuts in the CAP budget

The CAP budget should retain its current percentage of 38% funding from the EU budget. This should in turn be increased to 1.3% of gross national income (GNI).

“In the Committee’s view, any reduction in the CAP budget is unacceptable,” underlines John Bryan, rapporteur of this opinion, “since it would undermine the objectives and ambitions of the CAP policy and the EU’s resilience in the face of major challenges such as Brexit. Besides, we must not forget that the CAP budget is a major contributor to job and income security in the farming sector, but also to the production of environmental goods which we all benefit from.”

Maintaining the current two pillar structure of the CAP is important with Pillar I payments supporting farm incomes and Pillar II for rural development. However, only genuine farmers should receive direct payments. Generational renewal and support to young farmers are important.

Since Pillar II (rural development) funding supports more vulnerable sectors and areas as well as investments, modernisation, learning, resource efficiency and animal welfare, the Committee fervently opposes any cuts in this Pillar. “Any reduction would disproportionately affect Member States where Pillar II makes up a comparatively larger share of overall CAP funding”, outlines Mr Bryan.

Full text here: [https://www.eureporter.co/author/eu-reporter-correspondent/](https://www.eureporter.co/author/eu-reporter-correspondent/)
At its Plenary session on 17-18 October 2018 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

**Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES)**  
Spanish Union of Consumer Cooperatives  
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**CCMI/161 - Industrial policy towards 2030**

The opinion pleads for an holistic approach to reconcile growth, climate, environmental challenges and societal problems in a fair transition design. It underlines that Europe’s renaissance means a fully fledged master plan for European industry, mainstreaming industrial policy across all EU policies, enabling industry to transform and generating industrial added value through creativity and smart design, social innovation and fostering new sustainable and inclusive industrial models.

The EU Strategy should recognise the importance of value chains and addresses ambitious measures to develop these further. Rather than focusing on individual sectors, the Strategy should ensure attractive operating conditions in Europe. The measure of the success should be the potential of individual European value chain links to be integrated into global value chains.

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**  
National Confederation of Disabled People (ESAEA)  
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

**ECO/462 - Regulation on the ERDF and Cohesion Fund**

The EESC reaffirms its strong commitment to and belief in cohesion policy and considers it a major instrument for bringing the EU closer to its citizens and for tackling disparities among EU regions and inequalities among citizens.

The EESC completely disagrees with the cuts to the cohesion policy in general, and in particular cuts of 12% to the ERDF and 46% to the CF.

The EESC underlines that the decrease in the national co-financing rates will hinder the implementation of projects, especially by Member States facing budget difficulties.

The EESC calls upon the Commission to make the criteria for co-financing more flexible.

The EESC considers that the Commission’s proposal to reintroduce the N+2 rule is not supported by practical evidence or by the results analysis of the implementation of the N+3 rule.

The EESC welcomes the Commission’s proposal for the simplification of the use of the funds.

**Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES)**  
Spanish Union of Consumer Cooperatives  
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**ECO/466 - Institutional investors’ and asset managers’ duties regarding sustainability**

The EESC welcomes the design of the Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth. Both the proposed new Regulation and the revision of the Directive lend substance, consistency and effectiveness to the development of the Action Plan.

This opinion goes to the very heart of the fiduciary obligations of financial market participants. End investors will be able to bring their sustainability preferences into line with their informed investment decisions.

Financial market participants help the European economy transition towards a greener, more resilient and circular system, by incorporating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors.

**A D O P T E D**

**Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES)**  
Spanish Union of Consumer Cooperatives  
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**ECO/456 - Action Plan on Sustainable Finance**

A sound system of sustainable finance, with a long-term approach, is the most important driver for restoring trust in the markets and connecting savings to sustainable investments, providing complementary sources of funding for SMEs and strengthening green and social infrastructure projects.

The EESC supports the Commission’s road map on financing sustainable growth, but wishes to make a number of comments:

- it is important to make the financial value chain more sustainable as a whole;
- sustainable investment is inseparable from responsible lending;
- The renewed taxonomy proposed should be promoted worldwide and should be incorporated into EU law uniformly and simultaneously in all Member States,
The EESC agrees with the Commission Proposal to amend Regulation (EC) No 391/2009 on ship inspections and certification, which is necessary as a result of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union (EU).

The EESC believes that the changes proposed will create an environment of opportunity and recommends that the Commission foster closer cooperation between all of the relevant European, national institutions, and the Recognised Organisations, with which Member States have signed authorisation agreements.

The EESC strongly recommends that the European Union as a collection of Member States should commit their support for an increased role of the European Maritime Safety Agency in the field of ship inspection and certification.

The EESC has evaluated the consistency of the planned changes to the directive on data re-use with the aims for improvement. The Committee generally welcomes the Commission’s proposal for a revised directive as it is sure that the proposed changes will have a beneficial effect on the general aims for improvement.

However, the proposed changes are not sufficient to effectively improve the problematic areas of existing directive. If one of the main reasons for amending the directive and one of the main goals is to prevent the problems identified in the assessment of the directive’s current application, a more active and targeted approach is needed and a “high legislative intensity” options must be chosen in order to solve specific problems.

The impact assessment insufficiently reflects the views of stakeholders on the choice between high or lower legislative intensity options.

• Nature and the environment in the EU are undergoing a major crisis. In the view of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the LIFE programme (with its wholly insufficient level of funding) is an inadequate response to this contemporary environmental crisis and will be unable to have any sort of substantial impact. The Committee does however explicitly welcome the continuation of the programme in general.

• In addition to significantly increasing the budget for the LIFE programme, there needs to be much more consistency between all EU policies. The EESC has already repeatedly criticised this inconsistency, which has a negative impact on nature and the environment, but nothing has changed.

In its opinion, the EESC welcomes the EU Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 (hereafter Strategy) and in particular the creation of the EU Youth Coordinator as a part of it.

The Committee believes that the Strategy should be more connected with existing EU programmes, such Erasmus+, the Youth Guarantee and the European Solidarity Corps.

The EESC believes that, for the Strategy to deliver, it should focus on the three following objectives:

• The cross sectoral approach, taking a holistic view of young people and their needs and rights;
• The new EU Youth Co-ordinator should primarily lead on cross-sectoral work;
• The EU Youth policy should be included in the European Semester process to focus more on delivery, particularly in cross-sectoral areas.
The EESC welcomes the European Commission proposal as a much-needed instrument for the promotion of EU values and history, fundamental rights, democracy, the rule of law, the participation and support of a vibrant and diverse civil society, and the engagement of local communities.

The EESC calls for consistency between the EU’s external and internal policy engagement in human rights and democracy, and thus calls for overall funding of EUR 1.4 billion to the Fund.

The EESC believes that the Fund should be based on a truly participative and bottom up-approach, and calls for the use of innovative funding tools to allow civil society participation and capacity to be reinforced at local, national and transnational level. It calls for specific earmarking of funding for civil society organisations, namely at least 50% of the different strands.
Why prospect of brexit back stop could mean the best of both worlds here

“In the midst of the political turmoil surrounding the closing stages of the Brexit negotiations, there are certain things of which we can be sure. The first is that the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better, whether or not we leave the European Union. The second is that the serious questions being asked about flaws in the way the referendum was funded and operated will continue to be debated for months, if not years, to come. The third is that the constitutional confusion created by any UK withdrawal will shake the foundations not only of the UK but also the EU, including Ireland, for years, even decades, in the future. So, what can we salvage from this potential shipwreck of a situation from which there looks to be little means of escape?

Leaving aside my genuine belief that the UK should have remained in the EU for reasons which are more and more obvious as the negotiations continue, the push for a People’s Vote is becoming irresistible. The European Movement Northern Ireland, of which I am honorary president, has put its weight behind the excellent work being done on this by young people in particular in the People’s Vote, Our Future Our Choice, Derry Girls Against Borders and many other groups battling against the negative impact of Brexit in Northern Ireland.

But, without a People’s Vote, possibly changing the will of the people based on a more informed debate and new knowledge and understanding of what Brexit actually means, the only choice left for Northern Ireland is to hold tight to every lifeline thrown.

The biggest and best in these sorry circumstances must be the backstop which surely offers the best of both worlds.

By possibly staying in the single market and the customs union, Northern Ireland could become the envy of the British Isles, attracting foreign direct investment from far and wide in its position as a gateway to Europe, the UK and the rest of the world. Is it any wonder Scotland wants the same lifeline?”

Impact on social care means that it’s time to think again on Brexit

“The debate around Brexit is consuming reams of newsprint and hours of TV media coverage as well as occupying much of the time in parliamentary and other chambers across Europe. Following a survey of our members, the ALLIANCE decided earlier this year to conduct meetings in local communities and town halls to give people an opportunity to raise first hand their fears and worries about what the future challenges around Brexit are. Our members had expressed concerns about the post-Brexit future for charities and communities, specifically relating to funding, the health and social care workforce, access to medicines, employment and human rights.

Yet despite the extensive high level debates taking place, those attending Brexit town hall meetings still felt that there was an absence of dependable information and uncertainty about the future. While most participants expressed a strong preference to remain in the European Union, a few who had voted to leave in the referendum two years ago had now changed their mind and felt that it was in the best interests of their local community to remain in the EU. We observed a 5 per cent swing from leave to remain in Govan, and a 28 per cent swing in Aberdeen. When high level discussions around customs union and trade barriers were broken down to local impact on potential delays and shortages to the supply of medicines to patients in communities, people had real concerns about the scale of the challenge which Brexit poses in the next few months. Many commented on the concerns relating to the health and social care workforce.

A recent care inspectorate report found that more than a third of social care services across Scotland have reported unfilled staff vacancies in the past year, and almost half of those faced difficulty recruiting the right staff. When you take into account that the health and social care sector in Scotland currently employs 12,000 EU nationals (3 per cent of the total workforce), the potential impact on the workforce is clear. Attendees at our local town hall conversations echoed these concerns, telling us that “combined with an elderly workforce, the health and social care system is already creaking”. For all of its shortcomings, the EU has provided the third sector in particular with avenues to increase spend on employment and training initiatives that many fear will not be supported or replaced by sound regional policy initiatives.”


Meetings with the national delegations of Diversity Europe

On 11 July, I began my round of meetings with the various national delegations. In July, I had the opportunity to discuss with the Italian delegation.

On 19 and 20 September I had the honour to meet with the French delegation and with our colleagues from Benelux.

In October I met with the Romanian delegation. During the December plenary I will meet the Finnish delegation on Wednesday 12th.

80 million of persons with disabilities will struggle to vote next May due to physical, communication and legal obstacles. This is why the European Disability Forum launched an EU-wide petition calling on EU governments to ensure elections are accessible to all.

President of the European Disability Forum and Vice President of the Diversity Europe Group Yannis Vardakastanis added: “We are not citizens if we are not able to vote. Voting, and standing for elections, are two of the most important rights we have. This ongoing discrimination has to end.”

Sign our #DisabilityVote petition: https://you.wemove.eu/campaigns/european-elections-for-all

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