Berlin’s International Green Week (IWG) is the annual fair for food, agriculture and related industries. The event takes place every January at the Berlin exhibition centre, Messe Berlin and is one of the largest agri-food fairs in the world with around 400 000 visitors over the nine days. IWG has been held since the 1920s.

The Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) accompanies IWG. This annual international conference focuses on global topics key to the future of the agri-food sector and takes place during IWG. The forum brings together representatives from the worlds of politics, business, science and civil society interested in food and agriculture. This year, the GFFA tackled the issue of “Shaping the future of livestock – sustainably, responsibly, efficiently”.

After the conference, 69 agriculture ministers published a GFFA 2018 statement highlighting the role of more sustainable, more responsible and more efficient livestock production in meeting the Agenda 2030 sustainable development goals, particularly SDG 2 on ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture’.


IWG’s opening ceremony has always been an important forum for political statements related to food and agriculture policies. This year, we heard statements from EU Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan, the president of the DBV German Farmers’ Union, Joachim Rukwied and the German agriculture minister, Christian Schmidt.


The main topics were the future of EU agricultural policy after 2020 and the guidelines for the German government’s agricultural policy. As in many previous years, Simo Tiainen took part in both the GFFA and the opening ceremony for the IWG.
International Green Week in Berlin
Global Forum for Food and Agriculture

Estonia celebrates silver anniversary at Green Week

The Republic of Estonia is celebrating two anniversaries this year. 2018 will mark both its 100th anniversary and its 25th year participating in Green Week in Berlin. This was the 10th year that Roomet Sõrmus has organised Estonia’s stand for Green Week where, under the slogan “Naturlich Estland”, visitors could taste high quality food and specialities. The stand offered a wide range of food and drink, such as the very popular moose sausages with Estonian special mustard and rye bread, naturally made and environmentally friendly blueberry, cranberry and lingonberry juices, yoghurt and other dairy products, and various alcoholic drinks. Estonia was an official partner country of Green Week four years ago and has benefited a great deal from it. Since then, more and more people are visiting Estonia to enjoy the delicious food products available.

Green Week is a perfect opportunity to meet representatives of farmers and politicians from across the EU to discuss agricultural policy matters and develop cooperation.

Unlike some years, this year no official EESC delegation took part in Green Week. However, some EESC members were present as part of their professional activities. Roomet Sõrmus and Simo Taininen from Group III took part, as well as their German colleagues Udo Hemmerling and Volker Petersen.

Natural and delicious food from Finland

This year, IWG’s Finnish Department comprised 20 small companies promoting Finnish food, beer, spirits and tourism. The Michelin chef Sauli Kemppainen served Finnish food using natural ingredients, and the real Santa Claus was of course present. The Finnish Department was opened by the agriculture and forestry minister, Jari Leppä and the president of the MTK Farmers’ Union, Juha Marttila. IWG’s Finnish Department is a joint project run by the ministry of agriculture, the Food from Finland programme and the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners, MTK.

More information on IGW Berlin:

Conclusion of the 10th Global Forum for Food and Agriculture:
Ensuring food security through sustainable livestock farming:
SOLIDAR held its already renowned progressive civil society awards in early 2018. The 15th edition of the Silver Rose Awards was a unique evening that highlighted the achievements and promoted the successful initiatives and actions of individuals or organisations who had made notable contributions to social justice, regardless of the political environment.

Conny Reuter, SOLIDAR secretary-general, declared that the overall priority of the prize was to promote social justice, in Europe and elsewhere in the world. He said that SOLIDAR considered the award to be very political and progressive – it was not meant to honour charity, but rather distinctive political engagement.

From the vast number of nominations, the jury – comprised of MEPs and representatives of major trade unions and civil society organisations – selected six winners from several categories:

- Together for Social Europe
- Building Learning Societies
- Organising International Solidarity
- Lifetime Achievement Award
- Special Award by the Jury

The National Union of Worker-Producer Cooperatives (NUWPC) from Bulgaria won one of the awards. The NUWPC’s mission is to help people with disabilities to take part in the social economy. The model of cooperatives is built on social and democratic values, and they aim to contribute to the well-being of both society and their employees. The NUWPC was represented by its president, Stilian Balasopulov.
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JANUARY PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here:

Alain COHEUR (BE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Health Technology Assessment (rolling programme)” - INT/844

Pater KRZYSZTOF (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Transparent and predictable working conditions” - SOC/572

Antonio LONGO (IT) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “High Performance Computing” - TEN/659

Arnaud SCHWARTZ (FR) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Actions to improve environmental compliance and governance (Communication)” - NAT/730

NEWS from Group III

On 6 March 2018, Group III (Various Interests) will be holding an extraordinary meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria.

In line with the first priority of the Bulgarian Presidency, for European economic growth and social cohesion, a conference entitled ‘Supporting Vulnerable Regions and Citizens: boosting sustainable growth and cohesion’ will take place at the Boyana conference centre, which has been kindly made available to the EESC Group III by the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

This conference will include keynote speeches by Bulgarian ministers and panel discussions on three main topics, which are as follows: investing in and stimulating vulnerable mountain regions; creating opportunities and protecting the rights of vulnerable citizens; promoting economic development and combatting depopulation in non-urban regions.

More information:
During the Plenary session in January, the Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Ms Roussinova presented the four priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency to the EESC members:

1. The future of Europe and young people
2. The European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans
3. Security and stability in a strong and united Europe
4. The digital economy and digital skills for the future

She also outlined the four key themes of the Bulgarian Presidency aiming at putting high priority on the field of social policy and employment by strengthening the social dimension of Europe and tackling the future of work, early childhood development policies and equal rights for people with disabilities.

Following her presentation, three members of the Various Interests’ Group intervened.

Dilyana Slavova, president of the Section for External Relations and member of GRIII, draw the Bulgarian Deputy Minister on topics such as connectivity, security and prosperity as well as the European prospects and the roadmap for Western Balkans. She added that the Western Balkans would be the main topic of a conference in Sofia, organized in May 2018 by the EESC and urged on the ‘paramount importance that the Bulgarian Presidency launches the development of roadmaps for each of the countries from the Western Balkans and focuses its efforts on connectivity in the regions’.

As president of the Section for employment, social affairs and citizenship, Pavel Trantina was very pleased that Ms Roussinova was presenting the Bulgarian priorities during the Plenary session, with her field of competence. He firstly thanked her for the two requests for exploratory opinions (on the future of work and on the socially sustainable concept for the digital era) and for her invitation to present them at her conference on ‘The future of work: A lifecycle approach’ in March.

‘It is also good to see that you are bringing a new topic to the debate – brain drain’, highlighted Mr Trantina regarding the tragic reality in several countries in eastern and southern Europe; putting stress on ‘the need to create quality jobs in less affluent European countries, which will serve to counteract further depopulation of the regions concerned’.

He also took this opportunity to congratulate her on Bulgarian ambitious plans to adopt a Council position on the Working conditions directive on 21 June and mentioned that an EESC opinion on that topic will be delivered in May.

Other topics covered by the EESC have been outlined: implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, management of migration, finalisation of the legal basis of the European Solidarity Corps and the new EU strategy for education.

‘More solidarity, support of volunteering of young people, as well as civic education and media literacy are becoming much more important (...) We hope that the Council under your leadership will strengthen the position of civil society, since it is the best ally to preserve liberal democracy in the functioning European Union’.

Marina Škrabalo highlighting on the Western Civil Society Forum to be held soon as a strong message


Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU

19 January: Civil Society Space in the EU - Launch event for the report of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) “Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU” - In collaboration with the EESC Liaison Group.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee’s Liaison Group held the launch event of its report on ‘Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU’, followed by a panel discussion: ‘Towards the Future’.

The event took place on Friday 19 January at the European Economic and Social Committee and Group III President Luca Jahier was one of the panellists.

The Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group Mr Conny Reuter opened the event.

Following the presentation of the report findings by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Director Mr Michael O’Flaherty, Mr Luca Jahier gave his immediate reactions regarding the report findings:

• He acknowledged that we are undergoing a crisis of increasing illiberalism, threats to democracy, to fundamental rights and to the rule of law.

• He underlined that similar conclusions have been reached in other studies in regards to the global decline of support for liberal democracy.

• He noted that although the FRA report focuses on European civil society organisations on human rights, it efficiently describes the difficulties faced by a wide spectrum of civil society organisations across the EU.

• He stated that in order to tackle the serious systemic threat to our democratic systems, we need more civil society, involvement and actions, since fundamental rights are put into question, notably in Art. 2 of the TEU and the EU Charter of the Fundamental Rights. He also took this opportunity to recall that participatory democracy is a key issue for the EESC.

• He was pleased to have seen the mention of the EESC engagement in monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) in the report.

Mr. Jahier added that the EESC has recently adopted 2 relevant opinions: ‘Financing of Civil Society Organisations by the EU’ and ‘The European Control Mechanism on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights’ and he announced that a study on civil society in the EU and on its future scenarios for 2030 will be published next month at the initiative of Group III.

The second and last round of the Towards the Future panel debate aimed at reflecting on ways forward in order to face the challenges outlined in the FRA report. Group III President Luca Jahier highlighted 3 key issues which should be taken into account:

1. The decline of the traditional advocacy and watch-dog role of European civil society, in contrast with the growing role of digitalization, individualism and the increase of the economic impact on our societies.

2. The issue of funding: Mr. Jahier expressed his hope that the next MFF will increase CSO funding and European civil society organisations. Besides, he highlighted the EESC recommended the creation of a European Fund for democracy, human rights and values with an ambitious budget.

3. The future governance of the European democratic space: Mr. Jahier shed light on the Committee’s proposal to establish a legally binding European Monitoring Mechanism, in order to assess the compliance of EU fundamental rights in our Member States. The decision of the EESC to set up a temporary study group on fundamental rights and the rule of law and a forum for discussion on the situation of human rights in the EU Member States was also emphasized.

Panellists included, among others:

• Michel Forst - UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders
• Luca Jahier - President of Group III (EESC)
• Mary Lawlor - Founder of NGO ‘Front Line Defenders’
• Katerina Hadzi-Miceva Evans - Director of ECNL (European Center for not-for-profit law)

Here you can download the report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU

Have a look at the press release about the event:
Luca JAHIER (IT)
President of the Various Interests' Group

Arno METZLER (DE)
German Association of Consulting Engineers
Vice-President of the Various Interests' Group

16 January:
Dinner organised by Dr Andrzej Malinowski (Employers of Poland)

On 16th January, after the EESC Bureau Meeting, Mr Luca Jahier and Mr Arno Metzler took part in a dinner with Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska, EESC President Georges Dassis, the heads of the EESC Groups and prof. Jerzy Hausner, who is the Chairman of Open Eyes Economic Summit Program Council.

The President of Employers of Poland, Dr Andrzej Malinowski organised this meeting in order to thank the EESC for its contribution to the success of the 2nd edition of the Open Eyes Economic Summit which took place in Krakow in November 2017.

It was an opportunity to have a summary of that event and to talk about the necessity of the revision of many well-established beliefs and economic practices given the current technological revolution.


Vitas Mačiulis (LT)
Lithuanian Solar Energy Association
Member of the Various Interests' Group

Pasi MOISIO (FI)
Federation of Finnish Enterprises FFE
Member of the Various Interests' Group

22-23 January:
Meeting of the European Parliament’s TRAN Committee – ‘Europe on the Move’

During the meeting of the EP’s TRAN Committee, six rapporteurs and the President of the TEN Section presented the EESC view on the first part of the European Commission’s ‘Europe on the Move’ package to the MEPs.

Two rapporteurs from the GRIII took part in this meeting.

Mr Vitas Mačiulis presented the civil society view on the interoperability of the electronic toll systems (TEN/639) to MEPs.

More information on the key points of this opinion:

Rapporteurs Pasi Moisio (GRIII) and Stefan BACK (GRI) presented the EESC opinion (TEN/636) on access to the international road haulage market and the occupation of road transport operator.

Opinion and its key points available on:

Pavel TRANTINA (CZ)
Czech Council of Children and Youth
President SOC section
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

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

24 January:
European Parents’ Association kicked off 2018 with the Year of Equitable Access to Education

A high-level event was organised in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on the eve of the 1st European Education Summit.

The event was hosted by Pavel Trantina, President of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship (EESC SOC) and attended by Commissioner Tibor Navracsics, MEP István Ujhelyi (S&D), President of European Parents’ Association Eszter Salamon, and EESC member Renate Heinisch. The aim was to discuss the role of play full learning in developing key competences like creativity and entrepreneurial mind-set.

During this debate on education, Mr Trantina highlighted that the aim of education should be to offer a promising future in Europe. According to him it is high time to start not to talk about education, but rather to put learning in our focus. Learning should be supported lifelong and life-wide, in formal, non-formal and informal settings, focusing on supporting the development of soft skills. Mr Trantina also offered his commitment to playful learning related to his background in scouting based on the principle of game. Pavel Trantina also highlighted an inspiring practice known to him, Hopscotch, a Czech-developed application for parents to support them to play with their children in a conscious way to develop skills.
Commissioner Navracsics identified playful learning as a way of not only skills development and acquiring knowledge, but also as a foundation of social engagement and thus active citizenship. He highlighted some important elements of play for learning: the opportunity to create, discussion, communication, unrestricted imagination and safety stepping into a fictional world, social and emotional power, free choice, building on internal motivation and a different learner-educator relationship. He highlighted the European Commission’s commitment to these learning principles and the need to support formal education to embrace it as well as their responsibility for supporting the creation of suitable social and physical spaces. He also underlined the need to introduce new ways of evaluation to support this. He also highlighted the importance of empowering parents and mutual learning.

Renate Heinisch, known as a long-term advocate of parental engagement and the importance of grandparents greeted the initiative and congratulated on the achievements of all practices presented at this event.

Launch of the Commission’s new toolkit on the use of EU funds for the integration of people with a migrant background

EU Funds for integration - How can we better support people with a migrant background

On 24 January, the EESC and the European Commission jointly organised the launch of the Commission’s new toolkit to help Member States to strengthen the integration of people with a migrant background by making more efficient and coordinated use of available EU funding instruments.

The Commission’s toolkit contains guidelines and practical recommendations for national and regional funding authorities, which should implement integration strategies and projects by tapping into various EU funds accessible under the current 2014-2020 budget period and combining them in a way that avoids overlaps and double financing and ensures synergies between multiple instruments.

Cristian Pirvulescu, President of the EESC Permanent Study Group on Immigration and Integration took part in this launch event as a moderator.

Through this Permanent Study Group on Immigration and Integration, the EESC has issued opinions and reports on the issue of migration. In early 2016, it was the first institution that launched fact-finding missions in 11 countries dealing with the refugee crisis. On 6 and 7 March 2018 it will hold its fourth annual European Migration Forum, jointly organized with the European Commission, which gathers non-governmental organisations and other groups working with migrants. The topic of this year’s forum will be the inclusion of migrants into EU’s labour markets.


Challenges and priorities

On the 30 January, Mr Ionuţ Sibian, President of the EESC’s study group on Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans – challenges and priorities - opened and closed the hearing in the framework of the REX/497 opinion.

At the request of the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU, the EESC was asked to prepare an exploratory opinion on the challenges and priorities that countries of the Western Balkans are facing in the European integration process, as well as in the area of economic and social cohesion. This public hearing contributed to the EESC’s work on its exploratory opinion which is expected to be presented at the EESC’s plenary session in April 2018.

It was organised at the EESC premises with a view to gather expert input during the preparatory process for this opinion from a wide range of stakeholders - civil society organisations, think tanks, and EU institutions included. The main message was that the countries of the Western Balkans need a clear roadmap for accession to the EU.


The social rights and the European Constitutionalism: a panoramic view

On 30th January, Mr Cabra de Luna was a speaker at the seminar on La reforma social de la Constitución Española. Constitucionalización como fundamentales de los derechos sociales. Los derechos sociales en el constitucionalismo europeo: visión panorámica in Madrid.

He explained among other issues how social rights have been transferred at the European level, both formally and materially. He illustrated the role of the Facts, Treaties and international agreements as well as of the European Union in that matter. He also demonstrated the real use of the inclusion and reinforcement of social rights.
He mentioned that “the constitutional treatment of social right scan and should be similar to that of civil and political rights, since both can and should be considered as fundamental rights. Without prejudice to the role of ordinary legislation, it should be possible in the Constitution to establish a basic minimum right and the obligation of public authorities to guarantee, ensure and protect a framework of social rights, by determining results and also instruments, as well as the establishment of a minimum level for social expenses. In this sense, with regard to the disability sector, equality and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities must be made visible, consecrating their treatment as a human right, as recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).”

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**WTO meeting in Buenos Aires: a (missed) opportunity**

The WTO’s 11th Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires, which took place from 10 to 13 December 2017 was judged as a ‘missed opportunity’. I would prefer to describe it as a useful experience allowing us to draw conclusions, and encouraging us to continue.

During the final session EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström expressed her disappointment at the failure of the Ministerial Conference to deliver any multilateral outcomes: ‘All WTO members have to face a simple fact: we failed to achieve all our objectives, and did not achieve any multilateral outcome. The sad reality is that we did not even agree to stop subsidising illegal fishing. Now, I hope that several WTO members, whose actions here in Buenos Aires prevented an outcome, will use the time following this ministerial meeting for valuable self-reflection.’

But the work of the WTO continues, and many members recognised its central role to global trade and development. We have the WTO’s current agreements, its structures of cooperation, and its invaluable dispute settlement system. We also need to intensify efforts to find solutions to important issues in the international trading system, such as on e-commerce, and working with all willing WTO members in an open, inclusive and transparent manner.

**There is one positive result from the conference and that is the declaration on gender.**

This received the biggest support at the conference: around 120 countries endorsed a Declaration on Women and Trade, marking a notable first in the global trade club’s history and introducing a direct focus on empowering women in this field.

Women are planning to work in five spheres:

1. Sharing respective experiences relating to policies and programmes to encourage women’s participation in national and international economies through World Trade Organisation information exchanges, as appropriate, and voluntary reporting during the WTO trade policy review process;

2. Sharing best practices for conducting gender-based analyses of trade policies and for monitoring their effects;

3. Sharing methods and procedures for the collection of gender-disaggregated data, the use of indicators, monitoring and evaluation methodologies, and analysis of gender-focused statistics related to trade;

4. Working together in the WTO to remove barriers to women’s economic empowerment and increase their participation in trade; and

5. Ensuring that Aid for Trade supports tools and know-how for analysing, designing and implementing more gender-responsive trade policies.

The REX section supported the Declaration and stated that it is also going to work on these topics together with DG Trade.

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**Europe and the environment**

On Wednesday 13 December Thierry Libaert took part in a conference on “Europe and economic transition” at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris.

The conference was part of a cycle of debates on the objectives and the future of European integration, bringing together some 20 participants from associations for the promotion of Europe. The focus was on two themes:

- energy transition
- planned obsolescence and the circular economy.

Thomas Pellerin-Carlin, researcher and member of the Jacques Delors Institute, presented a summary of the report Making the energy transition a European success. He explained that energy transition must comply with the “6 Ds”: Decarbonisation, Democratisation, Decentralisation, Digitalisation, Diversification and Disruption.

During the debate, Thierry Libaert presented EESC activities relating to the circular economy in general, exploring in more detail the issue of planned obsolescence, about which he has published several articles and a book entitled “Déprogrammer l’obsolescence”.

Link to the full report of the Jacques Delors Institute (online version available in French only):
Eighty years old and still innovative and creative

Dr Renate Heinisch has always been in the thick of it – at school, during her studies, at work, and as a member of parliament. Making an effort to help others is important to her. That’s why she sees herself as a representative of all elderly people in Brussels.

She has eight decades under her belt, but she is no stereotypical old woman. The still multi-talented former MEP Renate Heinisch turns 80 today.

Boxberg. Perseverance, focus, curiosity and an interest in meeting other people are among Renate Heinisch’s characteristics. She was chair of the parents’ council while her children were at school, and later became chair of her provincial parents’ council and vice-chair of the federal level parents’ council. In 1994, just three years after joining the CDU, she was elected to the European Parliament.

She continues to be passionate about Europe to this day. She spends a few days almost every week in Brussels. She is an honorary representative of Germany’s Federal Association of Senior Citizens’ Organisations (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen, BagSO) and, in this role, was nominated by the federal government to the European Economic and Social Committee. She has been a member since October 2002. Members have five-year terms of office, and the current one ends in 2020. “I’ll certainly continue until then,” she says resolutely. Following the saying “a rolling stone gathers no moss,” she learns something new every day and is constantly getting involved in new things.

While her first volunteering work was with schools and parents, she is now involved with older people. But once again, there is more to it than that. She describes this broad field succinctly: “I am involved in international policy relating to the elderly, striving for more rights for older people in care and for residential and transport environments that take older people into account.” But she believes that older people and their interests should be viewed as part of an intergenerational dialogue, not in isolation.

“I’m not that good at Facebook or Twitter, but I get by,” says Renate Heinisch of her relationship to these new forms of communication. She has a mobile phone and a tablet to hand. Digitalisation interests and challenges her. Her priority? “We have to bring older people with us as we enter the digital world.” Otherwise they will be left behind by developments that cannot be stopped.

She likes to change the slogan “lifelong learning” into “learning for a long life”. She finds it important to get to know young people’s issues and to get to the bottom of how they think. Meanwhile, she also calls on young people to be willing to consider and respect older people’s point of view. To that end she advocates an “intergenerational training plan” to bring together parents, grandparents, teachers, educators, and people from different cultures in order to learn together and from each other.

Renate Heinisch embodies this idea. She radiates intellectual vitality, is physically fit, and thanks to her European activities she has the chance to travel widely, constantly experience new things and talk to people with an open, international mindset. In addition to the weekly trip to Brussels, she has also recently visited Belfast, Rome, Auschwitz and Bonn.

She is enthusiastic about Estonia’s digitalised administration. Estonia has digital health cards, a model that she supports: she thinks it would be useful if medical professionals all over the world could get quick information about pre-existing conditions or vital medicines in an emergency. For her, this advantage outweighs the concerns raised by data protection advocates. As a pharmacist, she is also involved in the digital health literacy project – a database of permitted medications with reliable information on medicines.

Pursuing her own ideas

“I would like to continue to be a creative and innovative ambassador for Europe,” says Renate Heinisch. She pursues her own ideas, as can be seen in her categorical rejection of “anti-ageing projects.” Instead, she suggests “pro-ageing programmes”. Because now-one can run away from getting older. Rather, we have to make the best of it, embrace it – not deny it.

Looking back over her life, Renate Heinisch notices that memories from her childhood are increasingly coming to mind. On a recent visit to the House of History in Brussels, she saw a picture of Hitler shouting. Then she remembered having to give the Nazi salute as a five-year-old school pupil in Boxberg, and seeing dead bodies on the main street of her home town as she walked holding her father’s hand. Playing a Christmas carol on the piano makes her think of her parents’ friends, its previous owners. They were Jewish, and they left the piano to her parents when they emigrated.

The eighty-year-old finds packing her bags and carrying them around increasingly difficult. All the travelling from Boxberg to Brussels is already tough enough. “They really should finally build the S-Bahn between Osterburken and Würzburg,” she says hopefully. In her opinion, this would help both the elderly and schoolchildren and is sorely needed. Because she knows what it’s like to get stuck in Lauda with no way of going any further. Most of the time, her husband comes to pick her up, except on Thursdays when he spends the evening playing cards – a sacred occasion. Then he makes sure that she can find the car in front of the railway station. She says that he is the real core of the family, and the grandchildren’s favourite.

Today, Renate Heinisch is spending her birthday at home; the official celebration is tomorrow, in the Red Hall of the Teutonic Order Museum in Bad Mergentheim. The Heinischs will be spending Christmas with their son, who lives with his family in London. They are looking forward to meeting their fourth grandchild, just days old (two of her daughter’s children live in Berlin), as much as they are to seeing their son again.
Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 17-18 January 2018 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

**INT/832 - Promoting SMEs in Europe with a special focus on a horizontal legislative SME approach and respect of the SBA’s “think small first” (exploratory opinion requested by the Bulgarian presidency)**

The EESC:

- stresses that SMEs require special attention and invites the European Commission to make the Small Business Act (SBA) and its principles legally binding;
- invites the European Commission and the Council to include implementation of the SBA as a permanent scrutiny exercise in the Semester and Annual Growth Survey, in close cooperation with the representative SME organisations;
- calls for an inclusive, coherent, effective horizontal European SME policy which also takes into account the needs of all the different SME sub-groups, e.g. value-generating companies, micro, small, family and traditional companies as well as those operating in remote areas, the self-employed and crafts, and considers it essential to have a definition for each and every of them;
- recommends that the Bulgarian, Austrian and Romanian rotating Presidencies of the EU Council establish and operate a permanent inter-institutional joint “SMEs Advisory Group” with the SMEs' representative organisations.

**INT/831 - Combating fraud and counterfeiting of non-cash means of payment**

The EESC:

- welcomes the Commission’s initiative to prioritise the fight against cybercrime, as it aims to protect Europeans and businesses from cybercrime networks, and includes measures to boost confidence in the use of electronic payment instruments;
- is of the view that the benefits of digitisation must be flanked by mechanisms able to meet the accompanying challenges, so that the European economy and Europeans can enjoy the information society to the full;
- finds that a number of shortcomings need to be addressed and corrected in Articles 11, 12, 13 and 16 (settling conflicts of jurisdiction, exchange of best practice, specific measures on prevention to provide information, reinforcement of Article 16);
- is of the opinion that it is important to establish deterrents and mechanisms to inform the public about the modus operandi of offenders as well, through awareness-raising campaigns conducted by law enforcement authorities in the Member States.

**TEN/636 - Access to the international road haulage market and the occupation of road transport operator (revision)**

The EESC reiterates its support for the entire Mobility Package. It welcomes the aims of the current Proposal to ensure a level playing field in an unfragmented internal road transport market, avoid excessive administrative burdens on businesses, improve the clarity and enforcement of the regulatory framework and address abuse, such as the use of letterbox companies, non-transparent business models and illegal cabotage.

The EESC also supports the improved rules on infringement procedures and on the assessment of sanctions involving the risk of loss of good repute, both of which improve legal certainty.

The EESC welcomes the introduction of time limits for answering requests for information and the improvement of information available in national registers; it would welcome real time access for control authorities. Moreover, it considers that the data to be entered in national electronic registers should also include information regarding the drivers employed by an undertaking.

The EESC takes note of the potential of the digital tachograph as an efficient means of compliance control and supports its early installation, including on existing vehicles.

The EESC regrets that the legislation remains unclear and open to different interpretation on a number of points regarding cabotage rules. In order to have effective legislation, cabotage in all forms should be subject to similar rules.

The EESC supports the creation of a European Road Transport Agency.

**ECO/436 - Disincentives to tax avoidance or evasion**

The EESC welcomes and supports the European Commission’s decision to tackle the problem of intermediaries enabling aggressive tax planning. Making their activities transparent, through the reporting obligation will deter intermediaries from offering their clients tax planning schemes, and reduce the harmful erosion of Member States’ tax bases. This should create a level playing field and tax justice between companies that have a framework for aggressive tax planning and those that do not but which are subject to higher taxation to make up for the erosion of the tax base in the individual Member States.

The proposal provides a response to the desire of the majority of European companies for tax fairness between taxpayers, and to the increasing pressure from individual taxpayers.

It is important to ensure that the directive will be an effective deterrent to aggressive tax planning. More precise requirements for qualification of reportable transactions are required in order to prevent over-reporting from companies with time-consuming administration for both tax administrations and taxpayers.

The EESC calls on the Commission to review the five-day deadline for reporting, so as to ensure that it is feasible for the entities that are subject to the reporting obligation and, at the same time, is consistent with the objective of an effective reporting policy.

The EESC considers that the proposal for a directive leaves a number of issues unresolved, such as how it is to be applied to taxpayers in the digital economy, given the difficulty in determining their physical presence as taxable persons in individual Member State jurisdictions.

Imagine driving across Europe in a vehicle that is powered by non-fossil fuel, probably electric. Along the way theory would be plenty of fast recharging points ensuring that there is no anxiety caused by running out of fuel. Similarly, all heavy vehicles would have access to Compressed Nitrogen Gas (CNG) liquid Nitrogen Gas (LNG) Gas produced by biofuel or Hydrogen.

If such a dream was realised, then the highways and bye ways would have a fully equipped alternative fuels infrastructure and Europe would indeed be the world leader in its stated objective to reduce carbon emissions as signed up to in the Paris agreement.

President Junker has made it clear. Carbon emissions must come down signed up to in the Paris agreement.

If such a dream was realised, then the highways and bye ways would have a fully equipped alternative fuels infrastructure and Europe would indeed be the world leader in its stated objective to reduce carbon emissions as signed up to in the Paris agreement.

On current performance, the transport sector is on course to fail spectacularly, ensuring that the EU will not achieve its emission objectives and instead of leading the world become the worst offender.

The mechanism undertaken by the EU to achieve these objectives is called “An Action Plan on Alternative Fuels Infrastructure under article 10(6) of Directive 2014/94/EU.

The plan is structured on the assessment of each member state’s National Policy Framework under 10 (2) Directive 2014/94/EU. It is in this context that the EESC is working on an opinion which will outline from a civic society view the type of policy and actions needed to ensure that Transport reduces its emissions, while at the same time avoiding undue hardships on citizens.

Each National Framework is tasked with demonstrating the level of progress made in establishing such an infrastructure. They will be assisted by the allocation of some €800 million from the EU budget. A lot of this will go to establishing 800,000 charging points throughout the Union by 2020. Currently there are 200,000 units, which means that in order for the EU to reach that target there will need to be an urgent acceleration of this initiative.

Much of the action plans are targeted at urban centres. Clearly these are the areas that are affected by high concentrations of emissions, which in turn increases exponentially the health risk of people of all ages. It is in these areas that the high emissions are created and contribute hugely to climate the consequences of climate change. While the concentration of measures to alleviate emissions is in urban areas, the situation in rural areas is equally poor. It is possible to take a greater look at the use of biofuel manufactured in region using agricultural waste. Such initiatives are suitable to the development of circular economy projects and could overcome the challenges of establishing solutions in rural areas.

The action plans also challenge the shipping industry to establish the necessary infrastructure. In this instance there is some degree of optimism that the industry will succeed. Again the determination to succeed by the member states is key to a positive result.

Unfortunately, there is a real fear that the overall performance of the EU to say the least underwhelming. So far two member states have not filed a report to the commission by December 2017 (Malta and Romania) Of the remaining 26 members there is varying levels of success, with the majority coming in well below targets. It has been argued that because each country raises high levels of taxation based on the usage of fossil fuels, mainly oil, there is little economic incentive to accelerate a transition to renewable fuels. Certainly if member states fail to reach targets agreed; then there will have to be an urgent review by the commission. Already the evidence pointing to an outright failure to reach in any significant manner the necessary targets is mounting and it may already be too late for many of the 2020 objectives.

In broader terms the provision of electric car infrastructure must be viewed against the backdrop that only 1.2% of all cars sold in the Union in the first six months of 2017 were electrically-chargeable vehicles. The vast majority of sold cars were fuelled by petrol or diesel. Surveys show that up to 90% of citizens have not considered changing to alternative fuel based vehicles.

Some of the reasons for caution on consumer’s behalf includes: Fear of Range combined with no charging points, Lack of real information when journey planning and the initial cost of purchase. All of these fears are an indication of an existing threadbare infrastructure.

If alternative fuels infrastructure is to succeed, consumers of all types need considerable reassurance that these fears will be erased. They require predictability in matters of price, greater use of digital technology to organise reliable information and payment systems. While it is accepted that in the life time of a vehicle the cost of maintenance outweighs the cost of oil based engines, many consumers are unable to afford the higher out lay cost. This applies to younger people whose situation is usually determined by the fact many are on low wages and cannot afford to pay and indeed may not have access to the necessary borrowings needed to purchase these vehicles.

Equally the level of public awareness is dismal and the failure to use the many civil society outlets, including voluntary organisations involved in assisting their communities, the NGOs involved in promoting sustainable environment and the many consumer groups that are in existence.

Commercial representative bodies should also be involved, not just in terms of providing information to their members, but in contributing solutions that incentivise users to make the necessary transition.

Finally, civic society has a major role to play in encouraging a fuller awareness among citizens that an alternative fuels infrastructure is essential to meeting the goals set out in the Paris Agreement, which ultimately will benefit all of us.