EU elections 2019: the countdown has started

The European Disability Forum (E.D.F.) which represents the European disability movement, is mobilizing persons with disabilities and their families to participate in the European elections. As stated by its President Ioannis Vardakastanis, also Diversity Europe Group Vice President, “with our participation in the May elections, we make a new progressive beginning for the EU!”

On May 23 and 26 this year, the European citizens will decide about the future of the European Union. The 2019 European elections are crucial and strategic because for the first time in the history of the European Parliament, there is such a growing discontent with the European project supported and reinforced by Eurosceptic, populist, nationalist movements and political parties and of course by the inability of the EU leaders to present a positive narrative for the future of Europe (a progressive new deal).

The civil society organizations need to play a very instrumental role in mobilizing EU citizens not only to participate in the elections but to also persuade voters to vote in favor of the European Union and the values it represents.

Elections are by definition the climax of the political process and as such civil society organizations will need to position themselves and to campaign for a progressive, united and just EU, both, socially and economically. Neutrality in the 2019 elections plays the card of the Eurosceptics and populists. In my opinion, the campaign “This time I’m voting” implies that by not voting in the upcoming elections, one supports directly those who want to undermine the EU. Also, it should be stated that general campaigns and general messages do not mobilize citizens anymore. There is a necessity to show practically and with examples why the EU is important for all European citizens and to their daily lives.

In our case, the European Disability Forum (E.D.F.) which represents the European disability movement, tries to mobilize persons with disabilities and their families to participate in the European elections, by explaining to them how the EU has advanced the rights of persons with disabilities in more than 20 years. We try to demonstrate everything that the EU has established through legislation, policies and programs and of course through the milestone ratification by the EU of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN C.R.P.D). More particularly, the EDF has published the booklet “Your rights in the EU”; in which all of the rights established by the EU are clearly presented. Moreover, it describes the developments, legislation, policies, programs, main changes in the EU treaties, CRPD ratification and implementation are presented in a way that persons with disabilities, their families and other EU citizens that are interested will be able to understand the important contribution of the EU to this large minority of European citizens. Of course, they will also understand why we need to actively campaign for a progressive and Social Europe.

In the upcoming European elections, the message should be loud and clear: with our participation, we make the next European elections the beginning of a new progressive era for the EU and we can block those who undermine the EU.

More info:
http://edf-feph.org/know-your-rights

More than 20 years campaigning!
Amsterdam - June 1997 - EDF’s protest demanding the inclusion of disability in Art. 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty
During our Group meeting in January, we welcomed two guest speakers:

The Ambassador of Canada to the European Union, Mr Daniel J. Costello, mainly dealt with the advantages and success of CETA and the lessons learned from the agreement process.

Mr Karl Brauner, Deputy Director-General of the WTO, delivered a statement on Developments in free trade – obstacles and ways forward.

On 23rd January, two guest speakers engaged the discussion with our members during the thematic session on ‘Trade.’

The Ambassador of Canada to the European Union, Mr Daniel J. Costello intervened on the advantages and success of CETA and on the lessons learned from the agreement process.

‘Diversity is a fact but inclusion is a choice.’

To Mr Daniel J. Costello, it is crucial that we keep on working multilaterally for more open societies, fair and inclusive trade. ‘The global rules system has brought us shared security, prosperity and common values that we cannot take for granted (…) The best in CETA is that it brings us together. It just does not bring European and Canadian businesses together. It brings together policy makers, researchers, students, tourists…’

Opening services and investments, providing access to government procurement, supporting labour mobility, sharing values, engaging in dialogues and commitments to respect each other standards and to raise standards have been presented as significant success of the CETA.

A few lessons could be drawn from the process - in part from the civil society partners - regarding stakeholders, transparency and inclusiveness in terms of negotiation and promotion.

Mr Karl Brauner, Deputy Director-General of the WTO, held a presentation on the WTO and mainly tabled the positive contributions provided from the side of the organisation to the demands of the civil society:

- Initiatives in e-commerce, investments, micro SMEs, services domestic regulation, labour standards and women-led enterprises;
- A report on trade, gender and climate change to be presented on the 8th of March, on international women’s day;
- A module on trade and gender on how domestic support in agriculture can be used to empower women;
- A rules guided trade with sustainable development as a recognized objective;
- Discussions by WTO members on circular economy, climate change, oceans and fuel subsidies

Both presentations led to lively discussions with our members. Questions and comments were mostly raised by representatives of consumers, farmers, environmentalists, social economy, SMEs, welfare services and Liberal Professions.
WTO should address current and future needs of international trade. Today a critical mass of WTO Members believes that there is room for improving WTO rules in a way that enhances world economic growth, with a consequent increase in the standards of living in all countries. **And here is the role of the links with civil society that WTO should develop.** If conducted well, these contacts can make important contributions towards greater effectiveness and democracy in the global trade regime. Thus civil society in the face of the EESC could be the most appropriate discussion platforms for WTO reform.

I am optimistic about the future of the WTO and the multilateral trading system that it seeks to manage. The fundamental interests of all WTO members require a positive outcome. And I am convinced that there is now clearly momentum for real reform of the WTO. We all share the responsibility for it. We have left too many issues unanswered and the system is no longer adapted to address many of today’s global challenges.

We in the EESC support the rules-based trading system. We are in favour of a stable and predictable framework for global trade. We think it is high time WTO members find the necessary will and flexibility to lead the organization out of the current crisis and the EU to play a leadership role in the reform process that should be transparent and inclusive.

**Transparency** is one of the fundamental WTO principles and the cornerstone of a predictable trading system. Without transparency, informed and sound decision-making, let alone effective risk management, would be elusive.

**Inclusiveness** as:

- Opening opportunities to all WTO member states (developing countries)
- Meeting the needs of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises,
- Empowerment of women in trade. The EU has presented its initiative in Buenos Aires where 118 countries were engaged to find data indicating how women can participate more effectively in world trade.

We hope a proper WTO reform could help WTO deliver stability, predictability and achieve fewer trade distortions, fewer trade restrictions, greater openness, inclusiveness and, generally - fairness. For benefit of all of us!
Populism in the EU is currently at its highest levels since the 1930s. The average populist vote in EU Member States now stands at 24%, up from 8.5% in the year 2000.

In this context, it is with great pleasure that I commend to you the study 'Societies Outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism', which was commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), at the request of the Diversity Europe Group, the Group which represents civil society organisations. It is precisely because our Members represent such a wide spectrum of socio-professional sectors that we consider it our duty to use these networks and to raise awareness among citizens of the dangers of populism. Our value added lies in our access to local, regional and national civil society and citizen groups and we must put this value added at the service of 'Europe'.

What is interesting about this study is that it makes comparisons among regions in the same countries, one less and one more advantaged region. I am certain that we could project most of the conclusions to other EU Member States.

It will become evident to the reader that economic decline, social instability and limited levels of education are significant factors in explaining the increased support for populists throughout the EU. However, there are other interdependent and more important factors, such as the desire to preserve the status quo, to protect traditional values, monocultures or particular identities.

In parallel, real or perceived insecurities are fuelled daily by disinformation, whilst many young voters are attracted to the idea that populist parties can bring positive change to stagnant and incompetent political systems.

We as Members of the EESC have a double responsibility. To step up our activities at both the national and European levels, to strengthen networks, to better explain and to bring ‘Europe’ to its citizens. Ultimately, protecting and preserving liberal democracy is everyone’s business!
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JANUARY PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Jane MORRICE (UK) is the Rapporteur-General of the study group for the opinion on: “PEACE IV - Continuation of the cooperation programmes” – ECO/490

Mihai IVAŞCU (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Taxation – qualified majority voting” – ECO/491

Andreas THURNER (AT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “EC Progress Report on the EU Forest Strategy” – NAT/762

During the debate with Romanian Prime Minister, the Diversity Europe Romanian Group members were very active.

President Metzler also addressed Prime Minister Dancila, taking the opportunity to remind the Romanian Presidency that in October of last year, the Presidents of the three Groups of the Committee signed a joint declaration condemning Decision 273 to dismiss representatives of civil society organisations from the Romanian Economic and Social Council. He added that to this day no reply had been received yet.

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-january-2019
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

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

**Christian MOOS (DE)**
German Civil Servants’ Association
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**Breakfast meeting SME Intergroup**

On 30 January, I participated in a breakfast meeting with MEPs in the premises of the European Parliament in Brussels. The breakfast discussion was centred the theme: “EU legislation on Services and the Liberal Professions: Two years after the ‘Service Package’.”

The Single Market is the foundation and greatest achievement of the EU. We all agree that it must be based on fairness and equal treatment. Moreover, Services represent two thirds of the EU economy and generate 90% of new jobs. So of course in its Opinion on the Services Package in May 2017, the EESC welcomed the EC’s proposals.

However, the Committee also stressed that even in cases where it is legally possible to apply stricter compliance enforcement measures, it would be more appropriate to strive for enforcing best practices and consultation. The reality is that at the Member State level, both legislative powers and traditional systems of national professional regulation are viewed as the foundations of national systems. Hence any perceived EU intervention – for example through the new notification procedure or the obligatory proportionality test – would be politically sensitive.

In contrast, we believe that the way forward is through regular and structured dialogue, between the EU, Member States and key stakeholders. Such dialogue could help prevent the adoption of legal acts at the national level, which could hinder the process of European integration.

But the benefits of such dialogue between key players clearly goe beyond the EU Services Package. For this reason the EESC established two important categories: that of the ‘Liberal Professions’ and the Category of ‘SMEs, Crafts and Family Businesses’.

Together with Mr Kolbe, we have both been personally involved in the establishment of the former, which aims to coordinate the EESC’s relations with the European Institutions. To enhance the role and influence of the Liberal Professions, in the EU and the Single Market. As some of you will be aware, one is six European employees were working in the Liberal Professions in 2014. In 2010, enterprises in the professional, scientific and technical services, plus pharmacies, generated the equivalent of 9.7% of the total surplus in trade and industry. So this sector has considerable weight and should be regularly consulted and listened to by the European Institutions.

**“It’s Europe, stupid!”**

On 25 January, I was invited by the BBE, Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE - The National Network for Civil Society), an important umbrella of all NGOs involved in civic engagement, to give a key-note speech in Berlin on “What opportunities for a more open society will the elections bring?”

The conference was entitled “It’s Europe, stupid!” and is part of a campaign for voting in the European elections.

As I stated in my key-note opening, “If the coming European elections are to be an opportunity for the open society, then this must mean that we have to fight for liberal, pro-European parties to win and push back the populist and authoritarian parties and movements, not only in our countries but also there where they already hold the power. For otherwise, civil society with an active citizenship, the open society as we know it, will also soon belong to the past!”

**Tom JONES (UK)**
Wales Council Voluntary Action
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**Smart Villages**

On 29 January, I chaired a CoR conference on the 29th at the EESC on Smart Villages.

The following working documents were discussed:

- Cross-border dimension in disaster risk reduction (DRR)
- Towards a comprehensive European Union framework on endocrine disruptors
- A new European agenda to speed up the development of maritime industries
- Debate on Smart villages: Integrated strategic approaches to innovation in rural areas

The last panel was moderated by myself.

Indeed, it is timely that all concerned with a better future for europe’s villages and small rural communities persuade the Commission through its Agri and Regional Directorates to ensure clear, simple financial measures in the new Multi Annual Financial Framework. This aid should:

- support and enable local people to create inclusive entrepreneurial activity,
- Build on existing Smart Villages best practice,
- Take a sustainable advantage of natural and cultural rural assets,
- benefit from the resources of mentoring from Leader/LAG organisations
I presented my report on sustainable consumption to François de Rugy, Minister of State, Minister for the Ecological and Solidarity Transition, and Brune Poirson, Secretary of State to the Minister for State. As part of the Roadmap for the Circular Economy, the report demonstrates the Government’s momentum for transforming our production and consumption model, and invites it to go even further.

“Because the vast majority of French people had the opportunity to be confronted with the situation of being faced with a product that they wanted to repair and to hear guidance advice to a preferable choice of new acquisition” I recall in my report, reflecting our consumer model that still favors disposable to sustainable.

After several months of work, the conclusions of the report are in line with the work undertaken by the French Government for more sustainable consumption. This is particularly the case for the following proposals:

- Integrate the repairability index into a more comprehensive information on the estimated average life of the product
- Require distributors to inform consumers about the availability of spare parts and reduce their delivery time.
- Give priority to repair on product replacement

Eight of the measures advocated in my report are already included in the Circular Economy Roadmap and will be submitted to the vote of the French Parliament in the near future. For example, the Ministry for Ecological and Solidarity Transition and ADEME are working on setting up, as of 2020, a display of the repairability of electrical and electronic products with an index based on the energy label model.

The opening of the first cultural event of 2019, took place on Wednesday 23 January at 1 p.m. in the EESC’s Foyer 6 of the JDE building.

The launch event was a success, gathering around 60 people (including Members, staff and external invitees) on a busy plenary day for the Committee. Feedback received by the attendees was positive and people responded to the survey questionnaire with a rating of excellency/very good for the activity.

Renate Heinisch, EESC’s member (Group III) took the floor to present a more concrete insight into the sense and meaning of active ageing, thanked the German Federal Ministry for all the work done on this part of social life in Germany. She also presented the exhibition as an initiative which raises interest on the topic of adult learning and intergenerational education and praised the idea for creating the touring exhibition “What’s old anyway”, that has already travelled and been presented into many different spaces.

Under the leadership of our Belgian colleague Ronny Lannoo, the members of his local senior club visited the Committee. Due to the great interest, the visit had to be spread over two days. The participants had a lot of attention for the functioning of the EESC and the European institutions. Once again it turned out that the “European Brussels” often remains very far away for Belgians. Bringing the citizen literally to the European institutions proves to be an excellent remedy against the overly spread Euro-skepticism. In the afternoon lunch was served in the restaurant of the Committee, followed by a guided visit to the museum of European History and the Parlementarium. A formula that is also inspiring for other groups thanks to the “visit” service of our Committee for effective support.

On 30 January 2019 a Public Hearing (+/- 50 participants) has been organised by Ms Heinisch, Rapporteur of the own-initiative opinion on “Digital Health Literacy” (DHL). The Hearing was chaired and moderated by Mr Hencks as Vice-President of the INT-Section, presenting the recommendations and conclusions of this public hearing, that were given some considerations at the Drafting Group meeting on this issue, which took place in the afternoon of this day.

Aim of the event was

- to hear the views of the civil society stakeholders and health professionals on this very important topic;
- to draw some main recommendations and conclusions from the event that can feed into the discussion of the Drafting Group meeting and further into the final opinion of Section and EESC.
At its Plenary session on 23-24 January 2019 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

**Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)**
National Association “Mountain Milk”
President REX section
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**REX/502 - Women in the Western Balkans**

The EESC is a strong proponent of enlargement as it is in the interest of both sides - the Western Balkans and the EU. The success of this policy is a major factor for the EU’s global standing and the cornerstone of Europe’s stability and prosperity. The EESC is therefore convinced that the accession process should be pursued further with both vigour and rigour as one of the EU’s top priorities.

In this opinion, the EESC highlights the role of women as a key driving force for the consolidation of democracy, respect for human rights and freedoms, and economic and social progress. The purpose of the opinion is to raise awareness about and promote women’s political, social and economic rights and gender equality in the Western Balkans. Gender mainstreaming can be successful only if there is a strong political will and belief in the benefits that equality between women and men would bring to society.

The EESC emphasises the importance of developing a gender equality roadmap and measures that could lead to a more equal distribution of power and resources in the Western Balkans. Women’s rights groups, business associations and trade unions have been active in promoting the role of women in the region and there is a need for further focused and persistent work with civic and social partners in order to be effective in fighting and advocating for women’s rights.

**Antonio LONGO (IT)**
Defence of the Citizen Movement (MDC)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**TEN/684 - European Cybersecurity Competence Centre**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the Commission’s initiative, considering it an important step in developing an industrial strategy for cybersecurity and a strategic move to achieve robust and comprehensive digital autonomy. These aspects are essential for strengthening Europe’s defence mechanisms against the ongoing cyberwarfare that threatens to undermine its political, economic and social systems.

The EESC is in favour of extending the partnership to include the industry, on the basis of firm commitments on thescientific and investment fronts, and by including it in future in the Governing Board. In the event of a tripartite partnership between the European Commission, the Member States and the industry, the involvement of companies from non-EU countries should be limited to those that have long been established on European soil and are fully involved in the European technological and industrial base, and their involvement should be subject to proper screening and oversight mechanisms and to compliance with the principle of reciprocity and confidentiality obligations.
The EESC welcomes the proposal to amend the EU legislation governing Energy Efficiency on the basis that the changes are necessary as a result of the UK leaving the EU. The EESC recognises that the changes are technical and welcomes the fact that they will enable the new EU of 27 members to continue plans to implement the Directive on energy efficiency and the regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union.

The EESC strongly recommends that the EU should take advantage of all opportunities to involve civil society in achieving energy efficiency objectives, including the process of amendments, as necessitated by Brexit. The Committee also recommends that EU Commission commits to introducing a comprehensive EU wide communication strategy, which ensures that the objectives of the Energy Efficiency Directive and the regulation on Governance of the Energy Union are met as a matter of urgency, especially after Brexit.

The EESC considers it necessary to transpose into EU law the conservation and enforcement measures adopted by the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO), with the aim of achieving their effective, uniform implementation within the EU.

However, bearing in mind the fact that NAFO amends its conservation and enforcement measures every year, the Committee is of the view that the proposal presented does not provide an efficient mechanism for transposing measures adopted by NAFO or for updating them each year.

The Committee is in favour of a more efficient, simpler mechanism and therefore proposes drafting a regulation containing a single article establishing that the European Union must necessarily apply NAFO measures to its fleet.
On EU Communication & citizen consultations

European communication, what citizens say

From April 17 to October 31, 2018 citizen consultations took place throughout France. 70,000 citizens participated in 1,082 consultations and the theme of communication appeared frequently, which gives the opportunity to know better what citizens think of the communication of the European Union.

Four major themes, including that of communication, were highlighted during these consultations.

The first observation is that citizens are not familiar with Europe; its operation appears opaque and the reality of its activities is poorly known. Europe does not know how to communicate and citizens do not easily perceive its contribution in everyday life. Four major themes emerged from these exchanges:

Highlighting the concrete actions of the European Union

For many citizens it is necessary to bring Europe into everyday life, the visibility of the actions must be improved around two axes:

- Better understand what the European Union finances and especially at the local level so that everyone can better perceive the benefits in his daily life. Europe needs to better publicize its spending on projects developed by local authorities.

- Better promote progress through simpler, more educational communication, with clear figures on major emblematic policies such as youth, freedoms, customs policy. Europe must also make better use of its scientific results such as Ariane or Galileo.

Improvement of the communication on the functioning of the institutions

The communication from the European Parliament and the European Commission is considered inefficient, it is also perceived as incapable of offensive action to counter the many attacks on Europe. There are two ways to explore:

- A better knowledge of the European institutions. The activities are little known. Among the proposals, the participants in the consultations suggested the idea of developing training sessions and designating “Europe” referents in municipal councils.

- The role of the European Parliament has been particularly pointed. On the eve of the European elections, it is noted that its effective role is very little known, especially that of MEPs who appear little in touch with their national territory. Parliamentarians should “tour” citizens to explain their role and the functioning of their institution, they should also make their work better known.

Broader and more effective communication

The European Union appears disembodied and the European political personalities appear not very charismatic.

Several suggestions were made to foster a stronger sense of ownership; for example, the election of the President of the European Union by universal suffrage, the creation of stronger symbols as a “European Marianne”. It has also been observed that the term European “commissioner” is unattractive and that it might be interesting to replace it with that of minister.

The European speech seems too technical and the example of the RGPD was commented. A simpler language must replace the discourse on rules and norms.

Similarly, Europe must be able to better address young people. We must invite You Tubers to come to Brussels, create a European platform for young people who could present their initiatives, create European video games.

A stronger media coverage of Europe

The role of the media was widely commented during the consultations, generally to criticize them for being too systematically negative. The actions of the European Union are treated very little by the media, and when they are, the treatment is often critical.

(…)

CECOP-CICOPA Europe has decided to give a voice directly to young people and those working with them. Here is the result! Three videos illustrating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that cooperatives in industry and services provide to young people across EU.

Cooperatives are riding the wave of changes. They represent a valuable and secure employment and entrepreneurial option for young people. Moreover, they give young workers and entrepreneurs access to ownership and control over their own future. For excluded youth, cooperatives provide not only work inclusion but also sense of belonging and place where to be heard.

To illustrate our point, CECOP-CICOPA Europe has decided to give a voice directly to young people and those working with them.

Therefore they produced 3 videos illustrating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that cooperatives in industry and services provide to young people across EU.

http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories

http://cecop.coop/How-young-people-and-cooperative-values-are-creating-a-better-future-PART-1
Meetings with the national delegations of the Diversity Europe Group

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 2018 I met with the Romanian delegation, and we discussed our event in Romania on 7/8 May 2019, entitled ‘A Europe of shared values and civil society’.

During this first month of 2019 I met with the Polish delegation and with our fellow members from Spain, during which we discussed future work regarding Brexit and the rule of law.

Recovering colleague
Bernardo Hernandez Bataller

We wish our colleague Bernardo much strength during his rehabilitation period.

Together with the Environment & Consumers’ Category, of which he is spokesperson, we send our sympathy and wishes, and are looking forward to his return.

No need to say he is dearly missed at the Diversity Europe Group!

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