On 15 February, the Members of the Bureau of the ‘Diversity Europe Group’, in addition to the UK and Irish Members of our Group, met local politicians, academia and civil society organisations at Queen’s University in Belfast. Our objective was to take stock of the Brexit process and to exchange views on its consequences, for both civil society and the Peace Process on the Island of Ireland.

There was a great deal of interest in our visit, during which we had the pleasure of meeting the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Deirdre Hargey at the Belfast City Hall. Moreover, media coverage of the conference was the highest ever for an event by our Group. Some 24 radio and television interviews, plus written press by key media players covered the event. For example, BBC Northern Ireland radio, Radio France International, ITV network for Northern Ireland (UTV), the Times, Daily Mail, the Irish Independent, Irish Times, the Irish News, Belfast Telegraph, etc.

At the event, we were honoured by high level political speakers, including Brian Cowen, former Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and MLAs Caoimhe Archibald from Sinn Féin and Mike Nesbitt of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Together with a very active participation from the audience, the event demonstrated the importance of open democratic debate on challenging topics where strong differing opinions prevail.

Much of the discussion was of course on the consequences of the Irish ‘backstop’. As a German from Berlin, I fully understand both the symbolism and the impact of physical barriers and the importance of forgiveness.

As a European, I am convinced that our most valued assets are Peace, Democracy and Partnership. And although not everyone agrees on what the impact of Brexit will be on the Island of Ireland, there is no doubt that all of us, the other 27 EU Member States, European civil society and the European Institutions, will do everything in our means to ensure that the spirit of cooperation enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, continues in the minds and daily lives of all peoples on the Island of Ireland.

Being in Belfast before Brexit was the first step in this process. Reaching out in a spirit of partnership to civil society on both sides of the border and listening to their concerns. Beyond the implications on the Peace Process, there are many implications for the border communities and serious economic concerns, which would result from a re-introduction of border controls between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The current Common Travel Area and cross border trade of agri-food products in particular, would be severely impacted because of the closely integrated markets. So it is imperative that we stand by local civil society, whatever happens in the next few weeks.
Civil society knows no borders and we should already be thinking about how to continue to work together in the months and years to come. I am convinced that civil society has a pivotal role to play in complementing and enriching the political debate surrounding Brexit. It is precisely its diversity and its capacity to reflect the human, social and economic dimensions of the Brexit negotiations, which renders these actors as crucial interlocutors. For these reasons, our engagement should continue post Brexit and we support the idea of establishing a UK-EU Round Table, regrouping civil society representatives from the four nations of the UK.

However, it is also of paramount importance that we work together to dispel the negative myths and disinformation on the EU. The ‘Brussels blame game’ is in nobodies’ interest. On the contrary, we must join forces to inform, explain and communicate on the practical benefits of the EU on the lives of European citizens.

The future relationship between the UK and the EU is still unclear, but the EESC and the ‘Diversity Europe Group’ in particular, will without doubt continue to explore joint solutions for the peoples of Europe, on both sides of the Channel and of the Irish Sea.
At the Belfast conference on Brexit, members from Diversity Europe were presented with a range of issues that will affect people in Ireland and Northern Ireland as a result of the UK’s exit from the European Union. Clearly civil society is a huge beneficiary, in terms of shared European Union values, particularly those concentrated on securing lasting peace. Delegates were reminded of how communities in Northern Ireland suffered during thirty years of continuous violence. In many ways the legacy of these years, even after twenty years of peace, can be found behind the so called ‘peace walls’ which are physical manifestations of the deep sectarian divisions that remain.

Speakers reminded delegates that Brexit is not just about the impact it brings to trade and how it is regulated; it is also about the maintenance of peace. The peace in this instance, encapsulated in the Good Friday agreement, which is an international agreement brokered by the Irish and British Government. Heavily supported by the USA and the European Union, the agreement is a product of the huge desire of communities most affected by the violence. It is still a fragile peace and will require the unstinting support of all international actors to ensure it remains permanent.

While there is a realisation that Brexit is the overall wish of the people in the United Kingdom; there was also agreement that civil society in partnership with the political institutions will have to overcome enormous challenges in order to maintain the benefits of the Good Friday agreement. The presentations demonstrated clearly the huge role played by the EU in supporting the peace process. In financial terms the spending in the period 2007-2013 was 3.5 billion euro and projected in the current period 2014-2020 is 3.6 billion. Most of this spending is designed to support communities who are working to achieve long term peace. Many of these projects are targeted at communities who are affected by poor socio economic conditions. Conditions, that if unchecked, lead to the growth of sectarianism and ultimate violence.

However, the EU support is not just about finance. It is also about solidarity from a Europe that came through two world wars, was divided by the Berlin wall and extreme political ideologies. A Europe that despite its many problems, values above all else long term peace in all its regions, especially Northern Ireland. It is this reason, that the EU is determined that a hard border is not a consequence of Brexit. Such a border would return communities especially those living there to the troubled years, when they lived in a permanent state of fear. Civil society organisations in Northern Ireland demonstrated the challenges they face. Challenges that in the not so distant past, were tackled in an atmosphere where people lived in a state of constant threat; where violence was never far away. There are no commitments to bring an end to the need of peace walls, which although in existence as a necessary evil, continue to act as feature that prolongs the evil of sectarianism and makes the process of integration almost impossible.

Whether Northern Ireland remains outside the EU or inside, civil society organisations believe that the support of the EU in whatever form is essential to the long term reconstruction of a society, which has lost over three thousand lives in the space of thirty years. Such a reconstruction is still in its early stages; yet the Voluntary and community sector are clear their work will need another fifty years, in terms of eradicating the deep divisions which delegates were able to see for themselves when they visited the peace walls. Like all walls; it is only when they come down that true healing begins.
It is always a challenge to bring new people to Northern Ireland to visit parts of Belfast few would believe still exist in the European Union of the twenty first century. Many are shocked, even saddened to witness the deep division which exists between Catholics and Protestants exemplified by the ‘so-called’ peace walls which have separated these communities for years. It is true that shiny new developments have sprung up elsewhere, like the star-shaped Titanic museum, where local Protestants and Catholics mix and mingle with tourists of every colour and creed from far away places in a part of Belfast which once would have been considered a ‘no-go area’ for anyone from outside. Now tourists flock to see the murals marking loyalty and allegiance to British or Irish traditions daubed in the colours of the flags of two EU Member States joined at the hip by an invisible border which will soon become an EU frontier marked by the departure of one of its own.

The visit of Diversity Group Members to Belfast was a wake up call for all. Not only could they see, touch and feel the fragility of the islands and promoter of peace-building worldwide.

Diversity Europe Bureau members were confronted with what could be described as ‘the acceptable face of Brexit’ in the person of Jeffrey Donaldson MP. He told us what for him and his party, the Democratic Unionist party, Brexit is all about sovereignty. Brexiteers want to “take back political control” from an undemocratic and overly bureaucratic EU. So, presumably xenophobia, racism and immigration were not important in the referendum campaign and the result?

Furthermore, Sir Jeffrey conveniently overlooks the facts that the European Council is comprised of the elected Prime Ministers of the 28 member states; that President Juncker was appointed by the co-decision of the Council and the elected European Parliament. These are inconvenient truths for Brexiteers. Bureau members also confronted another inconvenient truth – the peace Walls in West Belfast. Tant pis!

Diversity Europe in Belfast
A Civil Society Perspective

Jane MORRICE (UK)
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Michael SMYTH (UK)
Habinteg Housing Association
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

GIUSEPPE GUERINI (IT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Fostering an entrepreneurship- and innovation-friendly single market – promoting new business models to meet societal challenges and transitions” – INT/881
CARLOS TRIAS PINTÓ (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The role of consumers in the Circular Economy” – INT/882
MIHAI IVASCU (RO) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Use-value is back: new prospects and challenges for European producers” – INT/883
JORGE PEGADO LIZ (PT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Evaluation of the Consumer Credit Directive” – INT/889
JEAN-MARC ROIRANT (FR) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Investor Citizenship and Residence Schemes in the European Union” – SOC/618
RUDOLF KOLBE (AT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Digitalisation, AI and Equity - How to strengthen the EU in the global race of future skills and education, while ensuring social inclusion” – SOC/622
TERESA TISZBIEREK (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Summary of the costs and benefits of Investments in occupational safety and health” – SOC/623
VLADIMÍR BÁLEŠ (SK) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The changing world of work and the longevity/ageing population - The pre-conditions for ageing workers to stay active in the new world of work” – SOC/624
BERND SCHLÜTER (DE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The European Pillar of Social Rights – evaluation of the initial implementa- tion and recommendations for the future” – SOC/614
SEÁMUS BOLAND (IE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Implementation of the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration based on EU values” – SOC/615
IOANNIS VARDAKASTANIS (EL) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Shaping the EU agenda for disability rights 2020-2030: a contribu- tion from the European Economic and Social Committee” – SOC/616
MINDAUGAS MACIULEVIČIUS (LT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “The sectoral industrial perspective of reconciling climate and energy policies” – CCMI/167
SIMO TIAINEN (FI) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Blue bioeconomy” – NAT/770
GÉNEVIÈVE SAVIGNY (FR) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Promoting short and alternative food supply chains in the EU: the role of agroecology” – NAT/763
CILLIAN LOHAN (IE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Developing synergies across different circular economy roadmaps” – NAT/764
JOHN BRYAN (IE) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Evaluation of the Impact of the CAP on Generational Renewal” – NAT/766
ARNAUD SCHWARTZ (FR) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Evaluation on Environmental Crime Directive” – NAT/767
EVANGELIA KEKELEKI (EL) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Transport, energy and services of general interest as drivers of sus- tainable European growth through the digital revolution” – TEN/691
KRZYSZTOF BALON (PL) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “For a better implementation of the Social Pillar, promoting essential services” – TEN/692
ARNO METZLER (DE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “External aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce economic migra- tion, with a special focus on Africa” – REX/516
PANAGIOTIS GKOFLASH (EL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “The role of the EU’s trade and investment policies in enhancing the EU’s economic performance” – REX/517
CHRISTIAN PİRŮVELUȘCU (RO) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Binding UN agreement on business and human rights” – REX/518
ALFRED GAJDOSIK (AT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “International Trade and Tourism - A Global Agenda for Sustainable Devel- opment” – REX/521
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FEBRUARY PLENARY SESSION
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

The Future of CAP
Plenary Session Debate with Phil Hogan, Commissioner for agriculture and rural development

On 20 February EESC members debated on the future of CAP with European Commissioner for agriculture and rural development Phil HOGAN.

In his speech, Commissioner Hogan underlined the importance of the evolution of CAP and put emphasis on a crucial question: ‘As well as adequate food supply, which additional public goods should the CAP provide in exchange for its privileged position in the EU budget?’

He explained that the Commission has therefore issued a proposal for a future CAP which is more ambitious with regard to the environment and climate.

Topics such as MFF, EU food chain, EU Agri-food trade, EU-Africa cooperation and EPA Japan were addressed.

During the debate, 6 Members of the Diversity Europe Group took the floor.

A particular tribute has been paid to our Group III Member John Bryan who drafted the NAT/747 Opinion CAP - Legislative proposals. As spokesperson of the Farmers’ Category he said: ‘We appreciate your close relationship with the EESC and support your work for a strong CAP, with a strong budget. Indeed, we see the CAP as one of the major success stories in the EU in terms of peace and cohesion. The EESC believes that the new delivery model will contribute positively’.

Mindaugas Maciulevičius stressed that sustainability is not only environmental and social but also related to economy. He referred to Baltic farmers, to the distribution of direct payments and to the lack of safety nets. He also advocated for the importance of being more active in using satellite data for farming.

Simo Tiainen raised two topics: the funding model for the second pillar of the CAP and the need and preparation for a transition period in order to ensure the continuity of the policy.

Roomet Sõrmus thanked the Commissioner for his good job on unfair trading practices and stated that fair direct payments and conditions are needed for all farmers in order to ensure a strong common market.

Roman Haken intervened on rural development, on the need for much more coordination efforts between civic society and the DG AGRI and on the LEADER/CLLD instrument that should be better anchored in many policies.

John Comer acknowledged the good work the Commissioner had done. In relation to the budget, he stated: ‘We cannot be expected to do more with less!’ He congratulated him on the initiative of the Agricultural Markets Task Force. He asked him questions on market swings and on managing volatility.

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-february-2019
Hogan is working on proposals for market transparency
A report on Hogan's participation to the EESC Plenary, by Klaas Oisinga.

“Our budget proposal for the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is 96% of the current budget. That does not seem a bad starting point for me for the forthcoming negotiations between the European Parliament and the European Council. This is what European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Phil Hogan said during the last EESC Plenary Session.

Hogan: “The EU budget 2021-2027 is a matter of government leaders and the European Parliament. If you want to keep the CAP budget, you must speak with the Member States that are net contributors to the EU, such as Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden. I wish you good luck”. The Irishman reacted furiously when asked for an inflation correction in the budget proposal: “We have not been doing inflation corrections since 1992!”. Hogan hopes that negotiations on the new CAP in 2019 can be concluded. According to him, the CAP must be based on three legs: economically, socially and environmentally: “The nine objectives for the new policy are divided equally between these three”.

Market transparency
The Irish Commissioner also said that EU legislation helps farmers and gardeners to strengthen their position in the chains. He will shortly present proposals to improve market transparency. This was one of the recommendations of the Taskforce Agricultural Markets led by Cees Veerman. The Taskforce advised on 14 November 2016 to introduce compulsory price reports across the board in the food chain.

Africa
Phil Hogan expects the next recommendations from another Taskforce on 7 March, namely for the African countryside. This Taskforce contains five members on behalf of Africa and five on behalf of Europe under the leadership of Irishman Tom Arnold. Kees Blokland, director of Agriterra, is in a personal capacity in the Taskforce. Hogan wants a paradigm shift in the relationship between Africa and Europe. It should help to create 10 million jobs in the African countryside in five years. Agriculture and horticulture must play an important role here.

Let’s build together the social Europe of tomorrow!

Jocelyne LE ROUX (FR)
Mutuelle MFBCO
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

The moment is ideal to think about what the European Union could be tomorrow, and, above all, what we, the mutualists, want it to be. We believe in its fundamental values and salute the historic, if not unique, acquis in human history: peace, the advancement of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, freedom of circulation. It remains remarkable that, in this territory, languages and plural cultures manage to talk to each other, to do together today, while they made war yesterday.

As part of the European elections, my organization, the FNMF officially launched the Place de la Santé – Europe campaign, and is calling for the construction of a social Europe, “fair, redistributive, respectful of the human and the environment”.

On this collaborative platform, an online questionnaire, translated into the official languages of the European Union and distributed in all Member States, is available to European citizens to find out their expectations of Europe in social matters.

Their answers will be discussed everywhere in France, during a dozen debates, in order to bring out proposals for Europe, in terms of health, social protection, sustainable development, personal data and employment. These proposals will be made public on the collaborative platform and voted on by Internet users.

Let’s cultivate justice
To support this initiative, the Mutualité Française and a dozen European mutualist actors, present in six countries (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and Austria), have co-signed, in the JDD, a manifesto calling for the construction of a “social Europe”: “At our level, we want to bring a vision of Europe, fair, redistributive, respectful of the Human and the environment,” they write. “We want to believe that it is the values of solidarity, our conception of the organization of life in society, which characterize us as Europeans... (…) In other words, if we want peace, let’s cultivate justice.”

The Manifesto is co-signed by the European partners (AIM, FIMIV - Italy, Montepio - Portugal, VDEK - Germany, SYLFG - Germany, Knappschaft - Germany, SVB - Austria, Christian Mutualiteit - Belgium, Solidaris - Belgium).

Let’s debate
On April 11, 2019, the Mutualité Française will organize a big debate with the top of the list in the European elections, to hear the answers they wish to bring to the expectations of the French in terms of social Europe. Similar events are planned in Milan on May 4 and Lisbon on May 10.

Full text here:
https://www.ltonoord.nl/thema/internationaal/internationaal-beleid/nieuws/2019/02/26/hogan-werkt-aan-voorstellen-markttransparantie?overview=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubHRvbm9vcmQubmVzdC1hYW1pdGlvbnMvaWRleG1lc3MvaWRleG1lc3MvdXJnZS5waHRtbGljZS5nZXRz

You’ll find the Manifesto here:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-vdKGY954w7LkJzExxyVCOmk1y-4VX9FC/view
Right of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament Elections

Krzysztof Pater – member of the European Economic and Social Committee, rapporteur working on the EESC report “Real rights of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections”, due to be presented and published by the EESC in March 2019.

Nearly one million EU citizens may be unable to exercise their right to vote in the European elections next May because of their disability, and many more may face obstacles when voting, according to a statement issued by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on Monday 11 February following a conference.

The barriers they face – be they legal or technical – when they want to exercise this right that we nowadays take for granted are still far too large.

National rules in 16 Member States mean that about 800,000 of their citizens will be deprived of their right to participate in the European Parliament elections as a result of their disability or mental health problems.

Millions of others will have no practical opportunity to vote due to organisational arrangements or technical barriers that do not take into account the needs resulting from their disability.

According to an upcoming report by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – which I produced on the basis of research conducted over two years in 27 Member States – there are some developments that offer hope for the future, but the situation in the EU is still bleak.

Not one single EU country has implemented comprehensive solutions to standardise how all of its polling stations are fitted out and run to ensure that they are user-friendly for all voters.

In fact, in eight Member States, anyone unable to physically get to a polling station will not be able to cast their ballot, since alternative forms of voting – such as postal voting, voting by mobile ballot box or electronic voting – simply do not exist.

In 12 countries, national legislation does not allow the polling station designated on the basis of a person’s place of residence to be changed to another that can better accommodate their specific type of disability.

The vast majority of polling stations in the EU are not fully adapted to the needs of persons with different types of disability. The public authorities often define a polling station as “accessible” if a wheelchair user can enter it, failing to take account of the needs of persons with many other types of disability.

This is why in no fewer than 18 Member States blind voters have no way of voting independently; they can only entrust somebody accompanying them to vote on their behalf.

The difficulties most frequently encountered by voters with disabilities include excessively small voting booths that present major difficulties for wheelchair users, and ballot box slots located such that some voters cannot independently insert their ballot paper.

Deprivation of voting rights is particularly worrisome. Although EU countries have in recent years tended to move away from automatically revoking voting rights for persons with mental health disabilities or problems, nine Member States still do this as soon as someone has their legal capacity removed or has a guardian appointed.

Seven countries limit the rights of these voters on the basis of court decisions taken on a case-by-case basis. In 11 countries an individual can never be deprived of the right to vote.

Only seven EU countries provide special polling stations for voters living in institutions with round-the-clock care or undergoing long-term treatment in hospitals. In almost one third of EU countries they have no way of voting. In other countries, while they are theoretically able to vote inside their institution, doing so in practice requires a great deal of support from the voter’s family.

Cumbrous administrative procedures and a lack of relevant electoral information adapted to different types of disability can also act as a deterrent to voting.

Why is that so? The EU Member States are not complying with the rules in force – not only with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but also many other international legal and political acts (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Social Charter).

As for the EU Electoral Act, although it did establish many detailed rules for the European Parliament election process, it still failed to safeguard this fundamental right for voters with disabilities.

There are some encouraging examples in the Member States. In eight EU countries, persons with disabilities are allowed to vote by post, and in 12 countries it is possible to vote by ballot box delivered to the voter’s current place of residence.

If the best practices from across all countries were implemented, an ideal system would emerge in which every EU citizen with disabilities would not only enjoy full voting rights, but would also be able to choose the most convenient way to vote.
Debate on REFIT
State of play of the REFIT platform and efforts to simplify EU legislation towards a better regulation.

During our Group meeting on the 20th of February, we held a discussion on the state of play of the REFIT Platform.

Mr Lanno, Group III member, firstly gave a general presentation about the platform, its role and composition. He provided the members with explanations on how REFIT opinions are adopted and on how the EESC is contributing to the platform. The stress was on the suggestions EESC representatives made during a meeting they had with representatives from the Commission last January: a clearer definition of the platform’s mandate and a more careful selection of the stakeholders as well as a better balancing of the focus between reducing vs improving regulations.

Ms Condurat, Policy Officer at the EU Commission underlined the EU’s efforts to simplify legislation and the principles guided towards a better regulation system. It was the opportunity for her to present the working methods, the main elements of the 2018 Annual Burden Survey as well as the further efforts to be continued under the next Commission.
How to strengthen the EU

On 21 February 2019, the EESC held the Civil Society for rEUnaissance event. The purpose of this event was two-fold: (1) to draw attention to Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union, with the support of a number of civil society organisations, and (2) to mobilise civil society at all levels in the run-up to the European elections.

The event was divided into two main parts: a morning session, including speeches and testimonies from high-level guests, and an afternoon session of topic-based workshops.

During the afternoon, Dilyana SLAVOVA chaired the panel entitled How to strengthen the EU as Global Economic Player.

Mrs Slavova started her speech by emphasizing that the EU is among the largest economic players in the world measured by GDP, and economic integration has played an important role in building this position. However, EMU does not stop with the introduction of the euro – it is a continuing process of economic policy coordination between the EU Member States.

Mrs Slavova concluded that this was why today it was important to discuss all of these challenges that we face today and to exchange ideas on how we can strengthen the role of the EU, using our internal and external tools.

Education about the EU

Education about the EU is the topic of the opinion requested by the Romanian Presidency that I co-write recently in the EESC. And it was also the topic of the Workshop 6 in the rEUnaissance conference. It brought us interesting testimonies and useful proposals.

Education happens life-long and life-wide and comes in three forms – formal (in schools), non-formal (in youth and other associations and other projects) and informal (via the media, through peers, etc.) – and we need to ensure these various forms complement each other, especially when we talk about learning about the EU. Good media-literacy and proper knowledge of EU processes are the best prevention against disinformation spreading around us today.

In the case of formal education, we must improve how young people are taught about the EU in civic education classes or, better still, across subjects. The idea is to go beyond descriptions of EU structures by letting pupils experience the practical benefits of the EU and EU values. Our draft opinion brings a number of practical recommendations in this regard, including support of teachers, change of the methods etc.

In non-formal education, there are many projects currently ongoing. We all know that there is a difference between teaching/learning about the EU and experiencing European identity first-hand. And therefore, we must ensure that as many young people as possible get the opportunity to participate in the EU funded exchange programmes, which are key for learning about diversity in the EU by enabling young people to communicate with each other. In this respect, it is vital to increase the future Erasmus+ budget and its youth chapter, in order to reach more people, including older groups.

Obvious recommendations for making informal learning about the EU a success include reaching out beyond the bubble of the EU institutions, using accessible language and adopting a more practical approach. However, these recommendations are not always followed in practice. Increasing media literacy across the whole population is essential. Good storytelling can also help – for instance via comic strips, as in the case of #EUsupergirl, who was with in the workshop.
Freedom of expression could be under threat…

NGOs which is not correct with their political goals. Freedom of association and will use the slogan of transparency to block and punish in real the activity of the campaigns are directed against civil society. It is easy to imagine that a government European values are attacked while anti-NGO laws are adopted and smear campaigns. In particular, the rule of law is challenged in many countries and movements have created a difficult climate for independent civil society organisations. In particular, the rule of law is challenged in many countries and European values are attacked while anti-NGO laws are adopted and smear campaigns are directed against civil society. It is easy to imagine that a government will use the slogan of transparency to block and punish in real the activity of the NGOs which is not correct with their political goals. Freedom of association and freedom of expression could be under threat…

Last week an Italian Think Tank presented to the press room of the Chamber of Deputies a report called “NGOs and transparency.” This research centre is known to have developed some of the policy positions by the League, one of the two government coalition parties. The report suggests increasing oversight on foreign funding and lobbying activities of organisations receiving funding from abroad. This proposal is widely inspired by Hungary’s bill Act LXXVI of 2017 on the Transparency of Organisations Receiving Foreign Funds. The law like that could open “the door” for total control and penalization of the civil society organisation.

Since some few years, civic freedoms are threatened in several countries of the European Union. The emerging of “illiberal” democracies, the rising of populist movements have created a difficult climate for independent civil society organisations. In particular, the rule of law is challenged in many countries and European values are attacked while anti-NGO laws are adopted and smear campaigns are directed against civil society. It is easy to imagine that a government will use the slogan of transparency to block and punish in real the activity of the NGOs which is not correct with their political goals. Freedom of association and freedom of expression could be under threat…

In this very serious and dangerous context, the EESC decided to establish in January 2018 the Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL). It is a horizontal body within the EESC tasked to provide a forum for European civil society organizations to meet and share their assessment on the state of fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law in the Member States.

The Group is leading by the president José Antonio Moreno Díaz (ES-II) and two vice presidents: Karolina Dreszer - Smalec (PL-III) and Jukka Ahtela (FI-I).

Others members from our Group are Christian Moos, (DE), Benbeno Rizzo, (MT), Marina Škrabalo, (HR), Ákos Topolánszky, (HU), Pavel Trantina, (CS), Ulrika Westerlund, (SV).

In its work, the FRRL group focuses on topics and not individual countries and aim to promote the respect for the European values listed in Article 2 TEU, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as the checklist on the rule of law by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. Its objective is to address both collective and individual rights, and, given the mandate of the EESC, also pay attention to economic and social rights. These rights are inseparable from civil and political rights and require special strategic attention.

The work schedule for 2019

- Study group meetings in Brussels: 2 April/2 July /16 December
- Country visits: Hungary 29-30 April / France 28- 29 May/ Austria 3-4 June/ Bulgaria 10-11 October/ Italy 5-6 December

After each fact-finding mission, the Group prepares the special report which summarizes the information and observations collected during the meetings in Member State. The FRRL group plans to organize visits to all Member States in the EU.

- Conference in Brussels: 5 November

In cooperation with civil society organisations, FRRL group will organise a conference to review the situation of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, to draw up proposals and recommendations.

In 2019 we will observe a few critical events: Europeans elections, Brexit, summit in Sibiu… They will clean the landscape or perhaps disturb the European institutional order.
Brussels Ukraine Lab 2019 at the EESC - Future of Ukraine: A Test through Elections

On 25 February, Dilyana Slavova and Olena Carbou (Executive Director of the Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office in Brussels) opened the Brussels Ukraine Lab 2019. This year the focus was on how the upcoming electoral cycle in Ukraine and the EU can impact the future of the country and bilateral relations. The main discussions were based on three panels: (1) Tasks for Ukraine, EU and the international community in 2019, (2) Constraints and opportunities of the electoral year and (3) Visions of the future of Ukraine.

President of the REX Section Dilyana Slavova dealt with the concerns and challenges for both Ukraine and the EU in 2019 and with the involvement of civil society in the follow-up of the implementation of the Association Agreement. ‘We remain confident that the March elections will happen with respect for democracy and the rule of law while ensuring the freedom of media and space for civil society (…) We must not miss out on the momentum in terms of reforms and bringing Ukraine closer to the EU and we need to encourage successful and sustainable implementation of the Association Agreement and of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area’.

The first panel was led by national and international public officials - H. E. Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Mr Christian Danielsson, Director-General for EU-Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations and Ms Kami Wittmer, Deputy Chief of Mission at U.S. Embassy. Experts from foundations, civil networks and research centers were involved in the second panel. The third panel was the opportunity to meet and discuss with advisers to the leading candidates in Ukraine’s presidential race.

Meeting of the Section for the “Single Market, production and consumption”

Thursday 7 March 2019 - Debate on “The impact of Brexit on the Single Market”

The purpose of the Section’s information debate was to listen to the umbrella organisations of the EU’s civil society and have them engage with our members on their views and recommendations regarding their respective sectors’ preparedness to alleviate the consequences of Brexit.

Ariane RODERT, president of the Section for the “Single Market, Production and Consumption” (INT) opened the debate by saying that with the current uncertainty regarding Brexit, the UK’s withdrawal from the EU will have an impact on Members States. Some Member States and sectors of our economies are more exposed than others.

Five external speakers were invited: Peter WILDING (president of the London-based think tank “British Influence”), Ben BUTTERS (former EESC UK member, director at EuroChambres), Esther LYNCH (Confederate Secretary at ETUC), Léa AUFFRET (senior policy adviser at BEUC) and Emer DEANE (Head of the Brexit Unit at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Ireland). They were accompanied by EESC members as moderators – respectively Ariane RODERT, Violeta JELić, Judy MCKNIGHT, Evangelia KEKELEKI and John BRYAN.

The conclusions were that we are currently witnessing a revolution triggered by a small part of the Conservative Party and that has fundamentally destroyed the consensus in the United Kingdom Parliament as well as the solidity of the two main political parties. Whatever will happen with Brexit next week, this raises doubts on the United Kingdom’s ability in the medium or long-term to create a policy platform for itself and even to remain united.

57th Session of the Commission for Social Development

The 57th session of the Commission for Social Development addressed the priority theme, ‘Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies’.

Renate Heinisch, member EESC and representing BAGSO from Germany, was involved in many discussion regarding “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

Mrs Heinisch had very fruitful discussions with Chilean Minister Sebastian Villarreal Bardet, Ministry of Social development, with good outcome for the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee (EESC), of which Mrs Heinisch is a member. He announced to be very interested in taking part in the next EESC meetings.

As stated by Minister Villareal, one of the most pressing challenges to the welfare of older persons is poverty, including the often inadequate living conditions of older persons. Homelessness, neglect, abuse, violence, malnutrition, unattended chronic diseases, lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation, unaffordable medicines and treatments and income insecurity are just a few of the most critical human rights issues that a large number of older persons confront on a daily basis. Despite their own poverty, older persons are often called upon to be providers for the household and caregivers for grandchildren and other family members.
At its Plenary session on 20-21 February 2019 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinion for which a Group III member was Rapporteur.

Jane MORRICE (UK)
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Member of the Diversity Europe Group
ECO/490 - PEACE IV - Continuation of the cooperation programmes

The continuity of the EU peace and reconciliation programme in Northern Ireland is crucial in the context of Brexit

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted in its February plenary session an opinion supporting the continuation of the European Peace and Reconciliation Programme (PEACE) in Northern Ireland after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. This continued support is considered as “crucial” given the sensitivity of the debate on the UK/Ireland border in the context of the Brexit negotiations.

The PEACE Programme was set up in 1995 as a direct result of the EU’s desire to make a positive response to the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994. The new programming period for 2014-2020, representing €229 million, provides for continued EU assistance to address the peace and reconciliation needs of the region through cross-community initiatives, particularly in the fields of shared education, children and young people, shared spaces and cross-border cooperation.

The opinion adopted by the EESC and drafted by Jane Morrice states that “the urgency of the situation created by the Brexit process and the eventual UK withdrawal requires an EU response to safeguard the peace process which matches the new needs of the region in the post-Brexit context”. It recommends not only maintaining the PEACE programme, as proposed, but also extending its life-span, as conflict resolution will take time and requires longer-term commitment than current funding cycles.

Successes of the PEACE programme are numerous and, according to a European Parliament resolution adopted in 2018, it should be promoted as the EU model to achieve lasting peace in other parts of Europe and worldwide. Its continuation is therefore considered “vital” by the EESC to help ensure the region does not slip back into conflict and tensions are not worsened in the post-Brexit context.

Welcoming the tremendous EU support for the NI Peace process, Jane Morrice, rapporteur of the EESC opinion, pointed out that the EU could include a commitment to increase the funding in the next round of the programme and to establish a European Peace and Reconciliation Centre in Northern Ireland, as proposed in previous reports issued by the EESC, the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Regarded as contributing to cross-community understanding in the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement, EU PEACE projects address peace-building, conflict resolution, shared understanding, trauma and legacy issues. The European Commission has proposed to continue the programme in the years to come, event after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. While agreeing to this proposal, the opinion adopted by the EESC includes some proposals to improve the implementation of the initiative from 2020, known as PEACE Plus.

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions
**OUR GROUP’S STRENGTH**

**VOLUNTARY SECTOR CATEGORY**

In **February 2019**, the Category appointed two spokespersons: Mr Roirant and Mr Trantina.

This was the result of a debate and a subsequent vote in which members could choose to vote for one of the candidates or for both of them. The category unanimously (8/8) voted in favor of the two candidates sharing the position.

The first formal meeting of the category will be held on 24 April.

**Pavel TRANTINA (CZ)**
Czech Council of Children and Youth  
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

**Jean-Marc ROIRANT (FR)**
Education League  
President Civil Society Europe  
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Our main objective is to promote and defend associations, which have in majority volunteer-based leadership. These are four main principles we want to follow:

- Category as a representative of the sector – we will present our topics and values across the committee – in Group III meetings, in sections, in various conferences. At the same time, we will maintain good relations with civil society networks in Brussels and with institutions, namely Commission and Parliament.

- Category as a defender of interests – we will pay better attention to opinions developed in the EESC and add our own “flavour” to them – topics, provisions protecting interests of associations etc.

- Category as a watchdog – we will observe the state of arts in member states regarding the freedom of association and conditions for NGOs work – in close cooperation with the Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group.

- Category as a promoter of new topics – we will use the chance to come up with new topics and give them proper space in the EESC.

**FARMERS’ CATEGORY**

On **1 March 2019**, the Farmers’ Category of the European Economic and Social Committee held a debate on the **implications of Brexit for European agriculture and future developments in EU trade policy**.

Brexit will affect the Single Market and the European Agriculture.

In this context the Farmers’ Category debated on the consequences of different Brexit scenarios for farmers on both sides of the Channel as well as on the specific situation of Ireland. The effects on European Agricultural imports and exports as well as the possible future developments in EU trade policy, in the event of Brexit, were discussed with high level speakers on the topic.

**SOCIAL ECONOMY CATEGORY**

On **7 March** the Social Economy Category held its first meeting of the year.

A full programme was foreseen, firstly with a hearing on the links between the social economy sector and disability, in the context of the forthcoming European Disability Strategy.

Speakers included the Vice-President of the European Disability Forum, the Director of Social Economy Europe, a Director of the ‘Grupo Social ONCE’ and two representatives of the European Commission.

A second panel debated the subject of social impact bonds and social outcomes contracting.

Speakers for this panel included representatives of the Interreg Alpine Space Programme, the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL), the Finnish Innovation Fund ’Sitra’ and the European Commission.

**CONSUMERS AND ENVIRONMENT CATEGORY**

On **13 February** the Consumers and Environment Category held its first meeting for 2019. Amongst other topics, a debate on following questions took place: “How have consumers and the environment benefitted from the European Union & what are the gaps, challenges and concerns for the future?”.

http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories
Who saves liberal democracy in Europe?

When the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history” in 1989, he did not mean the loss of change in time, but the worldwide victory of the American democracy and economic model. Today we know that was premature. At least liberal democracy is in great danger everywhere. What are the causes of this development? What can be opposed to it?

Authoritarian forms of plebiscitary rule, the “illiberal” (Viktor Orbán) or even “directed” democracy (Vladimir Putin) is on the rise. In Europe, it is no longer just Hungary and Poland who openly challenge the rule of law and liberal democracy. The Romanian government is undermining the constitution. Italy is ruled by populists and right-wing extremists. In Austria, too, these forces are involved in the government. In France they lead in the polls to the European elections.

Overall, a bloc from Europagegnern threatens to become the second strongest group in the European Parliament. And civil society spaces in Europe are becoming closer. Without a pluralistic civil society there is no liberal democracy. If liberal democracy dies, pluralistic civil society will die too.

The opponents of liberal democracy are usually xenophobic. They reject migration and multiculturalism. The great migration movement of 2015, but also problems of integration, have undoubtedly played into the hands of right-wing populists. Fostering and strengthening fears in the populations was such an easy game for them.

Especially the Central Eastern European societies have little migration experience. The fears of irregular immigration, however, can only insufficiently explain current developments in Europe. They may have been accelerating, reinforcing. But the authoritarian temptation that today challenges liberal democracy in Europe has deeper roots.

The change of power in Poland was largely unaffected by the migration movement. The reconstruction of the state in Hungary was already well advanced in 2015. The crisis of democracy has other, more important causes.

On the one hand, in this crisis of liberal democracy, the reaction manifests itself - in both senses of the word - to emancipatory progress. The equality of men and women, as well as the recognition and equal opportunities of sexual and other minorities is a thorn in the side of the right-wing populists of all countries.

On the other hand, it is the new social question that is pressing Europe and undermining the foundations of the liberal constitutional state. Part of the citizens consider themselves to be dependent on economic development. Fear of social decline and social exclusion often leads to identity and identification problems.

This is not only due to rationalization processes, which are accelerated by digitization and robotization. A particular school of thought shaped economic and social policy in all western states over several decades. The state had to stay out of business.

For example, the great waves of privatization in the 1990s in Germany and other countries followed the same logic as the state's withdrawal in Britain a decade earlier. The lean state was the measure of all things. The consequences for public services and the public infrastructure are open today. Social cohesion has diminished despite high levels of social spending in many EU countries.

(…)

FULL ARTICLE - upon request:

[europe3@eesc.europa.eu]
Jean-Marc ROIRANT (FR)
Education League / President Civil Society Europe
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

International conference EUROPEAN CIVIC ACADEMY
“(Un) Civil Society and Populism. What trends and perspectives for civic space in Europe?”

28 - 29 March 2019 – a third European Civic Academy will be held in Slubice in Poland at Collegium Polonicum, a cross-border, academic institution which was jointly brought into being and is being maintained by the European University Viadrina (Germany) and the Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland).

The Academy is organising by Civil Society Europe, the coordination of civil society organisations in Europe, gathering around 30 civil society networks and platforms active in diverse areas. The partners of the event are the National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP), The European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities (EASSH) and Collegium Polonicum.

The title of this year's conference is “(Un) Civil Society and Populism. What trends and perspectives for civic space in Europe.” The aim of the conference is to discuss issues related to the future of Europe and the role of civil society organisations in building it. During two days of plenary sessions and workshop meetings, participants will have the opportunity to exchange knowledge, experience and prepare action plans for the future.

Primary goals of the Academy is to bring together activists and leaders of civil society organisations with academics from all over Europe (including the Black Sea Region) to discuss societal challenges relating to civil society and democracy.

Nowadays Europe has gone through significant changes during these last years and civic freedoms are now threatened in several countries of the European Union. The emerging of “illiberal” democracies, the rising of populist movements have created a difficult climate for independent civil society organisations. In particular, the rule of law is challenged in a number of countries and European values are attacked while anti-NGO laws are adopted and smear campaigns are directed against civil society.

In this context, Civil Society Europe would like through the organisation of a dedicated European Civic Academy to give activists key insights into these developments and concrete tools on how to address them. Building partnerships between the academic world and civil society are ever more needed.

Civil Society Europe with its partners is very keen to invite the EESC members who are interested in participating in this event. We believe that it will be an excellent opportunity to meet and discuss with many activist and scientist about the challenges for the future of civil society in Europe.

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-MARC ROIRANT,
President of Civil Society Europe

- Jean Marc ROIRANT you chair Civil Society Europe. What is your definition of European Civic Academy?

European Civic Academy is firstly an alliance between the academic world and the European networks of associations to support and reinforce the construction or refoundation of real civic spaces.

- Who are the activists participating at the Academy?

The European Civic Academy is targeted at civil society leaders across Europe, working to promote the values of Equality, Solidarity, Inclusiveness and Democracy. Because we are in Poland, several members of OFOP (National federation of Polish NGO) will be present of course.

- From the academic side, what are the Universities who follow you?

Many NGOs are in contact with research laboratories and universities in most Member States. As far as the Academy is concerned, beyond our usual partners, we are in contact with many university centers. The network of “Citizens Universities” led by the Free University of Brussels will be represented. Georges Haddad president of Paris 1 Sorbonne will participate in this edition and will present the network “Una Universita”.

- Why have you chosen Slubice and Poland for this Academy?

The venue of the meeting is of high value for two main reasons, being in a country which is currently under review for non-compliance with the rule of law principles and where recent legal and administrative reforms have contributed to a shrinking civic space, but also gathering in a place that is a symbol of Unity and Reconciliation in Europe.
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.

Finally in February 2019 I had the honour to meet first with our British colleagues, and the next days with the Irish EESC delegation. We extensively discussed Brexit and possible outcomes.