The 7th edition of the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, which took place in Tirana on 16 and 17 April, concluded with a call for the next Commission to maintain the Western Balkans enlargement policy as one of its priorities in the interest of both the region and the EU.

More than 200 representatives of civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and the EU took part in the event, organised by the EESC with the support of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council.

One of the major concerns expressed in the Forum in the panel chaired by the REX Section President Dilyana Slavova was the shrinking space for civil society in a number of countries in the region. Our Group III President Arno Metzler also chaired a panel entitled ‘People to people relations – building bridges’, during which he reiterated that civil society plays a prominent role in the promotion of cooperation between EU Member States and reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

Participants emphasised in the final declaration that ‘freedom of expression and free media are prerequisites for establishing solid democracies’ and condemned the attacks on civil society organisations (CSO) by representatives of governments and government-funded media. It was also agreed that national Economic and Social Councils should play an important role in the implementation of economic programmes.

Trade issues were also discussed by the participants, who insisted on the need for further integration of regional economies by lifting all unjustified barriers imposed on imports of goods and services and attracting private investments through a favourable and more predictable business environment.

Regarding youth-related policies, the final declaration encouraged the authorities of the Western Balkans partners to invest “considerably” in quality as a way to reduce youth unemployment, but also to ensure that young people are better integrated in the Western Balkans, as this was the only way to “mitigate their tendency to emigrate”.

The need for civil society organisations to proactively establish and strengthen issue-based and/or sectoral civic networks was underlined as the best way to boost their impact towards beneficiaries, but also as an effective way to mitigate pressure or intimidation from political interference. It has been pointed out that the CSOs should strengthen their capacity and legitimacy by investing more in increasing their membership, as well as communication capacities with their constituency and the public at large. Emphasis was put on the importance of regional cooperation between civic networks in order to exchange best practices in their specific areas of expertise. Moreover, civil society organisations from the Western Balkans should be regularly invited to participate in debates at EU level.

Declaration and the articles related to the civil society: On the state of civil dialogue and enabling civic space in the Western Balkans the participants had different suggestions in order to guarantee the freedom of the civic space for a strong and effective CSOs. They noted that freedom of expression and free media are prerequisites for establishing solid democracies and stressed that social partners and CSOs constitute an important partner for the government playing an essential democratic role. Additionally, participants emphasized that Western Balkans authorities play a crucial role in guaranteeing the protection of human rights defenders, anti-corruption organisations and independent journalists. Furthermore, they called for the implementation of laws on whistle-blowing. Lastly, they called on the Western Balkans authorities and EU institutions to strengthen the capacities of associations of liberal professions in the Western Balkans.
In March, Group III President Arno Metzler and Vice-President Pavel Trantina visited Rome to meet Italian organisations caring for migrants on the invitation of the Italian delegation in Group III. The visit was kindly organised by our colleague, Pietro Vittorio Barbieri, former Chair of Forum Terzo Settore. He accompanied the whole activity as Member of Group III the first day. Giovanni Marcantonio, alternate of Mrs Marina Elvira Calderone completed the Group III delegation.

With the member organisations of Forum Terzo Settore (at its headquarters) we started our debates on the first day. In the current political climate, civil society organisations feel the worsening of attitudes towards the sector itself and helping to migrants especially. A more balanced public debate is needed. Despite the fact the Charter for good reception of migrants proposed by some of the Third Sector organizations to the former Government and subscribed by it is still valid, it is not followed by the current government. It is often the non-governmental organisations, who are helping migrants to integrate in Italian society, to get young migrant people and women out of the street.

Instead of supporting them they are being harassed by some politicians. What is the dangerous populist rhetoric, which is making things worse – relativizing and legitimising negative approaches towards migrants is making work of the NGOs more difficult.

Italian CSOs showed their great knowledge of what needs to be done and resonated their active role in reception. They support communities and provide a number of essential services. They reminded us that narrative has to change, showing migrants as an opportunity and putting individuals at the center. EU funded projects are very useful, but above all, feeling of European solidarity is crucial. What needs to be changed at a European level is the relocation of migrants: volunteering takes too long and gives the Italian population the idea that EU is not helping.

The second day was devoted to two visits on the spot. First, Differenza Donna and its centre hosting women victims of human trafficking in the suburbs of Rome. Since its creation in 2005 it has already helped more than 1.100 migrant women – both with its 6 beds of secure shelter and 21 lawyers, help desks and other services in and near reception centres. Currently, they face two big issues: governmental plans to regulate prostitution, which could make the misuse of migrant women legal, and a new law which could undermine their protection, which could cause that lots of migrants would become undocumented and could not be helped efficiently. The organisation representatives criticized that in case of prostitution, no focus is put on “clients”, the root-cause of the problem. To put it simple, they said ‘where there is no demand, there is no offer’.

In the afternoon of the second day, the EESC delegation visited headquarters of Arci, a large NGO of more than 5.000 branches, working on social issues in communities. Their experts are working also against woman’s trafficking and migrants’ exploitation on the labour market, especially in the agricultural sector. They estimate that out of around 430.000 illegal migrant workers, some 100.000 are in severe conditions of unlawful brokerage. Arci tried to reach them with their mobile units, to gain their trust and to help them, run prevention programmes in or around reception centres, but realised that for NGOs to get involved for instance in public tenders, the conditions are very difficult. Third sector reports exaggerated controls from the state, and other attacks and accusations from some politicians. In such atmosphere, it is difficult for fragile NGOs to run campaigns informing consumers about the conditions food is produced in. NGOs try to get companies or supply chains on board for voluntary subscription to higher quality standards. However, despite that, Arci is running a number of projects, including providing shelters for migrants in places confiscated from the mafia.

This extremely useful visit and in-depth debates showed the group III delegation that despite challenging environment, civil society organisations are strong in answering the needs of society in a very efficient manner. As our Italian friends told us: ‘Third sector is not here to compete with politics, it is a laboratory of change, innovations. NGOs are the space for democracy lived every day. That’s why we need to cherish them with extra care’.
Let’s not kidnap the European elections!

Perceived as a minor issue, European consultations have often been an outlet for voters. However, in the face of a weakened Europe on all sides, ‘these elections can no longer be the sounding board of national neuroses’, stated Thierry Libaert in a tribune in Le Monde.

The least we can say is that European elections present themselves to the worst. Since the beginning of the 2000s, these elections have been held in a climate of growing indifference, reflected in a rate of abstention still higher than 50% (56.5% in 2014). More worrying: only 40% of our citizens say they trust the European Parliament, against 60% in Germany, and, incredible if we think that the first elections took place in 1979, only 45% of French people know that parliamentarians Europeans are elected directly by the citizens of the Member States (Eurobarometer, December 2018).

The risks of a national outlet

Admittedly, the European elections, seen as less of a direct issue, have always been their ambition to defend France, their interests. The current danger of the European Union calls for urgency. Remarkable personalities like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman or more recently Simone Veil and Jacques Delors dreamed and built a political vision for our Europe. This is more than ever threatened by the populist states, who dream only of its dislocation for the sole benefit of small economic profits or immediate elections.

Let’s not fool ourselves. The European elections cannot be the sounding board of national neuroses and even less their therapy. The current danger of the European Union calls for urgency. Remarkable personalities like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman or more recently Simone Veil and Jacques Delors dreamed and built a political vision for our Europe. This is more than ever threatened by the populist states, who dream only of its dislocation for the sole benefit of small economic profits or immediate elections.

Between the diffuse threats to the East and the feeling of widespread chaos in the West and perhaps soon across the Channel, only the dimension of Europe can enable us to face the new strategic challenges that have emerged in recent years. Immigration and European identity, energy transition and climate, public deficits and purchasing power, European defense and national security, can France seriously act alone?

Addressing global issues

The citizens’ consultations revealed, in 2018, a great interest in European affairs and an impressive number of proposals were issued. The politicians have their role to play in the taking into account of this collective expression. The French must also be convinced that the defense of the interests of France is given priority by the election of representatives fully aware of European issues, able to sit full time and with no other ambition than to defend their interests.

There is more to be done than stick effects or grandstand effects, usually backed by shocking parliamentary absenteeism. Let’s not kidnap the European elections to bring them back to the debates of our national squares and archaic methods. On the contrary, let us take advantage of this imperative rise in height to tackle global issues with a face, a voice and a force finally united.

The “concert of nations” had its time in the twentieth century, with its long procession of disasters. What place do we want to build and guarantee tomorrow for our children, facing the Russia-China-United States blocks? Only the democratic vote for a united Europe can decide.

Read the article in its original version (FR) on the website of Le Monde: https://lemde.fr/2GpBggW
The CAP today & post 2020!

During our last Group meeting held on 20 March, two speakers took the floor with our Members during the Group’s thematic session on the CAP.

Mr Ricard Ramon I Sumoy, Deputy Head of Unit C.1. Policy Perspectives (Directorate C – Strategy, simplification and policy analysis – DG AGRI), delivered a presentation on the CAP - present and future aspects.

‘The CAP is a success story of the EU. We talk about a sector that manages 48% of the EU land and that produces food for 500 million consumers. Because of its importance, the CAP needs to continue to be a strong policy and a policy open to the whole society. Not only the farming community. Other players should have a say on the future of this policy.’

In his intervention, he mainly dealt with distribution of EU direct support to farmers, the 2021-2027 Budget and the future of CAP priorities.

Mr Paulo Gouveia, Chief Policy Advisor at Copa-Cogeca, presented the state of play with the CAP post-2020.

He emphasized two main aspects:

- **The CAP is relevant.** We should not forget the budget and the next MFF play a role in this.

- **Quality has to prevail over speed.** Time should be taken to reach the right decisions.

There are many challenges ahead of us: the outcome of the next European elections, the renewal of EU institutions, how, when and where and in what way the reports from the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Parliament will be taken over by the others and when a decision on the budget will take place.

The speaker also underlined, amongst other things, the need for a strong definition of genuine farmers, and voluntary capping accompanied by voluntary redistributive payments.

 `'The CAP is much more than money. It also implies rules, commitment in order to align with the demands of society.' He added that the SDGs will be key elements for the CAP and that new technologies should simplify the policy.

On 10 April Mr Maciulevičius took part as a speaker in a forum hosted by EURACTIV on bioeconomy and the CAP. The event brought together speakers from various sectors and perspectives to discuss perceptions of bioeconomy, biotech and innovation, and the future of bioeconomy in the CAP.

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Our Vice-President opened the Forum by stating that he would like to see more cooperation among regional governments, farmers and scientists and more investments dedicated to rural areas. He associated two keywords with bioeconomy, namely ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘sustainability’. He called for more investments into this economic branch which would help EU rural aspects to thrive. He added that knowledge sharing is essential when CAP is discussed. ‘We should be replicating success instead of seeking new solutions’, he said. In an interview, he urged for more concrete actions and cooperation at different levels: ‘We are talking about bioeconomy for 6-7 years now. But we are still talking. We should be starting and implementing that. Farmers need cooperation - working together with municipalities, with local, regional and national governments. (…) We should implement that as soon as possible and not wait for 6 or 7 years’.

To Mr Maciulevičius, it is also crucial to have regional clusters for bioeconomy.

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The role of bioeconomy in the CAP?

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<th align="left">Mindaugas MACIULEVIČIUS (LT)</th>
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On 27 March, the EESC held its 21st edition of the European Consumer Day. The focus was on the behavior of young people as consumers in an increasingly digital world. ‘How is technology influencing consumption patterns in younger generations?’ was one of the underlying questions. It was the opportunity for several of our Members representing consumers – Ms Rodert, Ms Miltoviča, Ms Kekeleki and Ms Mader – to actively engage in workshops on food, mobility and clothing industries and in a live debate on how social media impacts young people and their consumer choices.

The event was mainly dedicated to discussions on the role that young people play in the technological drift and how they can influence the policies that affect them directly. The reactions from the youth side to the EU’s current consumer policy and to the New Deal for Consumers have been addressed.

In order to better understand the new challenges ahead for consumer policies, three parallel participative workshops took place, investigating food, mobility and clothing industries.

- **Workshop n°1 - Food for thought: changing the world through food?**
  
The focus was on changes in food and eating habits of younger generations – with the emergence of diets such as the vegetarian, the vegan or the flexitarian ones. The core questions were: *Do young people want to consume in a healthier, more sustainable and more responsible way? How should we tackle these issues? What do they expect from regulators?*

- **Workshop n°2 - Youth on the move?**
  
  Mobility needs, demands of young people and evolving technology and transport options were dealt with. The core questions were: *What should mobility look like in the future, according to young people? In which world do they want to live in 2030?*

- **Workshop n°3 - Fast fashion and sustainability: a youth-driven challenge?**
  
The aim of this workshop was to look at how young people react to ‘Fast Fashion.’ The core question was: *How is Generation Y reacting to the challenges of over-production, waste creation, the use of chemicals and pollutants?*

Ms Kekeleki moderated the workshop conclusions and stated: ‘We have seen that consumers’ decisions still rely much on emotion. Let’s make sustainable an emotion in its own right.’ She encouraged the young audience to develop solutions for a safer and more sustainable future. She urged the youth to search for the most appropriate tools and to become members of consumers’ organisations.

This was followed by a debate moderated by the EU journalist Jennifer Baker on the influence and impact of social media on consumption. The development of these networks over the last few years has been so quick and wide-ranging that legislation does not seem to follow quickly enough its almost daily changes. *Products are now advertised in ways that consumers are not aware of, making them feel vulnerable. What regulations exist on these issues? Are they effective, applied and respected?’ were the main questions of this debate. The panelists were Mr Martin, Senior Legal Officer in Digital Rights at BEUC, Prof. Charry from the Louvain School of Management, Ms Madi, Education and Training Coordinator (from the National Institute of Consumption – France) and Pablo Jonas, Director of Influenzo.

Dealing with youth, consumption and engagement brought the participants to sustainability, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the transition to a circular economy and other emerging economic models.

Ms Mader wrapped up the day, thanked the participants and concluded: ‘Social media and big data! Use them. Do not be used by them.’

Ms Rodert, President of the INT Section, took part in the introduction session entitled ‘Changes in young people’s consumer behavior’ and invited the audience to tweet about the event and said: ‘I am so pleased this edition focuses on youth and trends for the future. We have complex challenges to tackle. We can only do it together!’ Mr Tavoularis, Director of Studies and Research at the Consumption and Enterprise cluster (CRÉDOC) presented the Y generation as having limited means, spending a bigger share of their spending on communication and being more sensitive to sustainability, social justice and gender-equality.

Mr Rizos, Research Fellow and Head of Sustainable Resources and Circular Economy tabled the outcomes of a study from Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) that show how millennials perceive communication as a basic need, much as food and housing. He added that owning smartphones has an impact on the way young people consume, with online purchasing representing a large share.


Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

Tom JONES (UK)
Farmer
Vice-president of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Making rural areas the engines of a sustainable Europe

The EESC’s Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) and the European Rural Parliament (ERP) held a joint event on 14 March at the EESC. The discussions focused on how to better integrate the aspect of the future of Europe’s rural areas into the policies of the next European Commission and European Parliament with the aim to promote a more sustainable Europe.

Mr Jones and the former President of our Group, Mr Nilsson gave brief inaugural speeches.

‘It is about making certain that we understand what sustainability means for people and for economies. (...) We have to find remedies. We have to find proposals which actually make certain that there is a new vibrancy in rural areas. Engines are needed. (...) Basically, we - as local people - are the engines of sustainable development,’ stated Mr Jones.

Mr Jones also moderated one of the panels entitled ‘An urgent call for action to new, incoming legislators to step up the role of rural areas in a sustainable Europe.’

This meeting prepared a set of policy recommendations which will serve as input into the EESC opinion on the Reflection Paper to be voted on at the July Plenary Session.

Ronny LANNOO (BE)
General Adviser, Belgian Union of Self-Employed Entrepreneurs, SMEs and liberal professionals
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Belgian Retail organisations assess the EESC opinion on Retail Sector

14 representatives from Belgian retail organisations visited the EESC. They were invited by our Member Ronny Lannoo. Among the guests - entrepreneurs from independent supermarkets, specialty stores and fashion boutiques. All of them are managers of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The discussion on the recent EESC opinion on the future of the Retail Sector in the EU was at the heart of the visit. Ronny Lannoo was the Rapporteur of the opinion and worked with Co-Rapporteur Gerardo Larghi (Group II). This opinion is the answer to a communication on the topic from the European Commission. During the meeting, the entrepreneurs unanimously gave their full support to the EESC opinion. They put the stress, among other things, on the increasing price competition to the detriment of profitability in many areas related to the distribution chain, the underestimated importance of quality, service and accessibility of city and village hubs as well as on tax discrimination among the Member States. At the same time, the entrepreneurs supported the call from the EC and the EESC to fully respond to quick societal evolutions, among consumers. However, they argued that this should be done in a realistic and profitable way with plenty of opportunities and a level playing field without discrimination and unfair competitive methods. ‘Otherwise we will further promote monopoly cases and the abuse of power by a few at the expense of producers, independent entrepreneurs and consumers. We cannot impose strict requirements on hygiene, safety, taxation and information, among other things, while multinational e-commerce giants, among others, escape from them,’ emphasised the Retail representatives.

They also encouraged the EESC to provide an appropriate follow-up to the opinion. Moreover, informative missions related to the Retail Sector opinion are planned with all stakeholders involved in Italy, in France, in Poland and in Finland.

Event information: https://europa.eu/!Td96WN

Event information: https://europa.eu/!wq34nF
Happy Mother Earth Day!

During the commemoration of 10th anniversary of International Mother Earth Day, the Ninth Interactive Dialogue of the General Assembly on Harmony with Nature has been held on 22 April in the Trusteeship Council Chamber.

This year the theme was ‘Mother Earth approach in the implementation of Education and Climate Change’.

Mr Lohan took part in the second panel dedicated to ‘Climate Action in Harmony with Nature’.

In a video message, he shared his views: ‘I am a big supporter of the Mother Earth approach. Indeed I think that putting a value on nature and putting Mother Earth and the Earth systems at the heart of our transformative approach to developing a new society and new economies is an essential way to create that transformation and ensure that the change is actually systemic’.

Mr Lohan, a keen supporter and user of the Sustainable Development Goals and Circular Economy policy initiatives, encouraged the use of policy tools that revolve around the concept of Mother Nature. In his speech he pointed out the risks of using a business model in which nature is not the focus of attention, this potentially leading to further environmental destruction and exploitation.

As a solution he referred to the concept of climate justice. In this sense, he emphasized the importance of designing a Charter for Fundamental Rights for Nature and Fundamental Climate Rights, also highlighting the significance of the circular economy. ‘There is a need of a cultural shift in the way we operate’, Mr Lohan added, mentioning the benefits and value of merging education and climate action with the goal of a new societal and economical model. Moreover, he concluded that working as a global team should be a priority in order to achieve a transformation that is not only desirable but that is required in order to face today’s environmental crisis.

Ms Dilyana Slavova (President of the REX Section, Group III Member), Mr Ahmed Réda Chami (President of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Morocco)

On 18 March, Ms Slavova met with Mr Ahmed Réda Chami, President of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Morocco. They exchanged views on how the Council and the Committee could be more efficient in reflecting the debates on economic, social and environmental topics.

Best practices related to relevance, productivity and visibility were shared. This meeting gave food for thought, especially in terms of inclusion of CSOs and citizens, actionable recommendations and increasing visibility through media, communication tools as well as partnerships with various stakeholders and joint projects. Going local activities, online consultations, presentations of studies through events and press conferences, missions to Member States have been highlighted. It was also an opportunity for Ms Slavova to underline a few efficient visibility actions implemented by the Diversity Europe Group, such as our Extraordinary meeting on populism held in Feldkirch (Austria) in order to reach citizens from non-urban areas.

A strong will from both sides to deepen their essential partnership in Euromed activities emerged from the discussions: the next Euromed Summit has been pointed out. Contributing to topics like digitalisation and SMEs, negotiating for an EU-Morocco Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), joining networking activities in the African Union context and keeping on reviving the Memorandum of Understanding between the Committee and the Council have also been part of the exchange.

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

Meeting with the President of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Morocco

Cillian LOHAN (IE)
CEO of Green Economy Foundation, nominated by the Irish Environmental Pillar
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Happy Mother Earth Day!
Democracy Alive: that was the name of the three-day festival that the European Movement International, along with its numerous partners, held on Texel from 11 to 13 April. Texel is the largest Dutch island in the Wadden Sea, around four and a half hours from Brussels by train and ferry. Over the three days of the festival, the main square of the largest town on the island, Den Burg, hosted a variety of organisations, ranging from European political parties, trade unions and civil society organisations to local vegan food trucks and stands selling Texel beer and lamb burgers (Texel is famous for its flocks of sheep and for the lamb they produce). Debates, workshops and presentations were held in a number of the pavilions and in the nearby Burghtkerk church, including opportunities to talk with Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator, with Spitzenkandidaten Frans Timmermans (Social Democrats) and Bas Eickhout (European Green Party), with representatives of trade unions and employers’ associations, with European Commissioners and MEPs, and with activists and artists. The list of guest speakers ran to almost 100 names – and, of course, the organisers included EESC president Luca Jahier on the short list of “featured guests”.

Mr Jahier took part in a panel discussion on Investing in the Future of Europe, in which the secretary-general of the European Movement International, Petros Fassoulas, led a discussion between Mr Jahier, Joanna Maycock, secretary-general of the European Women’s Lobby, Valeria Ronzitti, secretary-general of the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises, Luca Visentini, general secretary of ETUC, and the audience in a packed Burghtkirk.

In his opening remarks, Petros Fassoulas highlighted the unique aspects of the EESC as effectively the only institutionalised forum at European level where employers, employees, civil society organisations and NGOs – each with their own interests – can interact and enter into dialogue: an institution to be treasured.

Luca Jahier was the last of the four opening speakers, which gave his comments a particular impact. While the first three speakers did of course identify a number of positive aspects of the EU, they focused mainly on the negatives and on what could be done better. Mr Jahier, on the other hand, chose to take a different tack: he stressed that the EU is something to be proud of, and that we can – and should – be sending a positive message. For example, research consistently shows that there is no better place in the world to live than in the EU, due to criteria such as equality, social security, health care and education. We can also be proud of the way the 27 Member States have worked together in recent years on the Brexit saga, and of our joint efforts to implement the Paris climate agreement. What we need now, he said, is dreams and passion, if we are to take new steps forward.

He referred in particular to the passion and dreams of Greta Thunberg and the youth movement she has been able to mobilise – a movement based on hope for and dreams of a better world, and one that can be achieved.

The EESC president did of course acknowledge that there had also been some less positive developments. For example, in response to a question from the floor concerning the situation in Hungary, he explained in detail how the EESC had stood up for the preservation of the democratic rule of law and the position of civil society organisations and NGOs in countries where the rule of law was under pressure. He mentioned the Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law set up by the Committee and the fact-finding missions it had undertaken, including to Hungary. But, as Mr Jahier stressed, such developments in a country can only be turned around if the momentum is developed and mobilised within the country itself, which is why we specifically support civil society in those countries where its rights are being curtailed or threatened.

The audience gave the panel a warm round of applause, after which they had an opportunity to exchange views more informally, with snacks and drinks. In short, this panel discussion was another good example of the solid content and excellent organisation of this festival. It was certainly worth the boat trip.

Irene OLDFAHER (UK)
Director at the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (ALLIANCE)
Chair of the European Patients’ Academy on Therapeutic Innovation (EUPATI) UK National Liaison Team (NLT) and the Scottish National Dementia Carers Action Network (NDCAN)
Member of Board Scottish Ambulance Service
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

Report: Brexit – What Matters to You

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (ALLIANCE) has conducted a research on the Scottish communities concerns and understanding of the impacts of Brexit. The aim of the research was to better understand the local communities of Scotland that were often over-seen in the national debate on Brexit, to identify common concerns that could be brought to the national negotiations, and to explore the impact of Brexit to elderly people whom were often not heard.

During the REX Section meeting held on 27 March, Mr Stefano Manservisi (DG DEVCO, European Commission) was a guest speaker and mainly dealt with the topic of the European Development Policy, presenting the balance of the 2014-2019 Europeans Commission’s mandate and challenges ahead. His presentation was followed by a preliminary debate on EESC own-initiation opinion External aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce economic migration, with a special focus on Africa (REX/516). The debate was divided into 2 panels: (1) the EU’s approach to external aid and development cooperation in Africa and (2) the Role of civil society: experiences on the ground.

Mr Chaigneau (EIB), Mr Kipp (SWP) and Arno Metzler were the panelists of the first row of discussions. As Rapporteur of REX/516 opinion, Mr Metzler stated that external aid, investments and trade are not just about papers. ‘Civil society can participate through concrete projects and strengthen cooperation’, he added. This opinion has several core messages, including:

- The EESC would like to stress its engagement to be involved in a transparent and coherent approach. As Federica Mogherini, the EU’s chief diplomat says: We are political partners. The next step is to be true economic partners and deepen our trade and investment relationship.
- To achieve common objectives, strengthening economic collaboration will be crucial. Recent years have brought forward a new paradigm in the EU-Africa relations (for example in agriculture), focusing increasingly on policy cooperation and the promotion of a stable, responsible and inclusive business environment.
- A need to create a clear and transparent institutional architecture of EU development aid for Africa that allows a more realistic analysis and implementation of development aid. The EESC hopes that the Post Cotonou could propose a pragmatic platform for reformed development cooperation policy, consistent with the complexities of the development process.

Dr Bruegmann (Ethiopian Law & Justice Reform), Ms Niang (President, Forum of Solidarity Organizations International issues of Migration), Mr Gad (WFO) and Mr Wangsoner (EESC co-rapporteur of REX/516) were the panelists who highlighted experiences on the ground.

Europe is fun – experience Europe with all your senses

On 10 March Ms Heinisch attended the Matinée Europa-Union Aschaffenburg celebrating the slogan ‘Europe is fun – experience Europe with all your senses’. The event focused on ways for tackling populism, finding solutions for climate change, the continuous digitalisation, but also social topics, such as the concept of the social standards and the minimum wage. Amongst other experts and politicians who took part at the event, our Member discussed the work of the different European institutions and the voting system in the European Elections. Her main focus was on informing about the activity of the European Economic and Social Committee.

Barriers of access to justice of persons with disabilities in the EU context

On 15 March, a seminar hosted by the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) took place in Brussels. Mr Cabra de Luna was one of the panelists, replying to the question: ‘What are the main challenges different stakeholders face in promoting access to Justice for persons with disabilities?’

The event was aiming at 3 objectives: (1) to collect concrete information on the main issues in terms of access to justice, (2) to identify solutions that are in place or feasible measures to counter the current barriers and (3) to address cross-cutting issues linked with different support needs.
At its Plenary session on 20-21 March the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

### INT/874 – Digital health literacy

The EESC:
- recommends the development of an **overarching EU strategy with clear and closely monitored health literacy targets** to support people’s rights in health and avoid inequalities through digital devices.
- emphasizes that **different generations need different approaches for the improvement of digital health literacy, depending on their use of digital tools in daily life**. Citizens of all age groups, cultures and types of impairments as well as migrants must be integrated into the development of digital information sources. **The focus should be on people of the older generations who are increasingly addressed in the management of their own well-being and health care.**
- stresses that **the advantages of digital services can only be fully leveraged if people are able to access and properly understand the information provided**. Reading skills and a basic knowledge of mathematics are key prerequisites for peoples’ health literacy and must be achieved during school education in order to empower people.

### SOC/605 – Resilient democracy through a strong and diverse civil society

The EESC:
- is concerned that **considerable political forces in Europe, mainly but not exclusively right-wing extremist movements and parties, some of them already in government, are undermining liberal democracy and want to destroy the European Union.**
- stresses that **an independent civil society is a key democratic supervisory entity and a school of democracy.** It strengthens social cohesion. It can perform these functions only if the social, political and legal framework allows. Attempts to hinder financing from non-state sources restrict freedom of association and the operation of democracy.
- reiterates its **call for a Democracy Semester** with a European control mechanism on the rule of law and fundamental rights and a Democracy Scoreboard.
- emphasizes that national and European policy-makers must tackle **burning social questions and ensure social sustainability** with inclusive education systems, inclusive growth, competitive and innovative industries, well-functioning labour markets, fair and just taxation and effective public services and social security systems.
AD HOC – Listening to the citizens of Europe for a sustainable future (Sibiu and beyond)

‘We must avoid a top-down governance approach and step up efforts to reduce the distance with EU citizens. A structured civil society dialogue must become a real tool for democratic participation as provided for in the Treaty on European Union’ - EESC rapporteur, Yves Somville.

The EESC calls for a new EU strategy which takes a holistic and cross-sector policy approach centered around Europeans’ needs and sustainability, and puts forward policy recommendations touching on 11 priorities.

Listening to the citizens of Europe for a sustainable future also calls for an overarching strategy to implement the 2030 Agenda and address the needs of EU citizens. The strategy must ensure that competitiveness, growth, investment and business generally can become sustainable and serve the wellbeing of all EU citizens so that nobody is left behind. It must be backed up by an ambitious EU budget.

Under the Governance priority, the EESC recommends that all internal and external EU policies need to be coherent and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, allowing for the principles of efficiency and proportionality.

Under the People’s Europe priority, the EESC recommends pursuing measures to further enhance civic participation in EU policy-making in order to regain young people’s support for and faith in the process of European integration.

Communication must therefore be another priority for the new strategy. Enhanced communication on EU policies could tackle the mismatch between EU policies and the way in which they are perceived by Europeans and contribute to better policy evaluation in general.

Press release: https://europa.eu/!xc78GD

SOC/575 – Employment opportunities for economically inactive people

The EESC:

• urges the Commission and the Member States to place a strategy for dealing with the significant number of economically inactive people.

• believes that the Commission and the Member States must also focus their efforts on reactivation policies and policies to create job opportunities for all, in particular those who are most excluded from the labour market and who want and are able to work.

• recommends that the Commission assess the progress made since the last strategy of 2008 and, if needed, adopt a new, comprehensive strategy, accompanied by action plans and objectives assigned to the Member States for each sub-group of economically inactive people.

• recommends that the European Commission encourage Member States to make their active labour market policies more effective and to ensure that their public employment services are able to provide more targeted assistance for inactive people.

• believes that concerted efforts are needed in order to boost employment opportunities for disabled people: it urges the EU Member States to establish an employment quota system for persons with disabilities.

• recommends that Member States create specific activities, if necessary within local public services to upgrade and update the skills and competences of the economically inactive population.

• urges the Commission and the Member States to create specific and favourable incentives for companies to employ economically inactive people.

• proposes reducing the number of weekly working hours, starting with public services.
At its Plenary session on 20-21 March the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs.

**Krzysztof PATER (PL)**
President of the National Scout and Guide Court of the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHP)
Member of the Diversity Europe Group

**SOC/554 – Right of persons with disabilities to vote in EP elections**

The EESC:

- notices that about 800 000 EU citizens from 16 Member States are, on account of national rules, deprived of the right to participate in EP elections because of their disabilities or mental health problems.
- emphasizes that if the best practices from across all countries were implemented, an ideal system would emerge in which every EU citizen with disabilities not only would have the full possibility to vote but also would be able to choose for themselves the most convenient way in which to vote.
- stresses that there are no formal obstacles to EU to legislation also include guarantees on voting options for persons with disabilities. In any case, however, there is a need for a formal EP legislative initiative and for it to be approved subsequently by all Member States.

**Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL)**
President of the European Disability Forum
President of the National Confederation of Disabled People - Greece
Vice-President of the Diversity Europe Group

**ECO/484 – The future of cohesion policy in the post-2020 period**

The EESC:

- is of the firm view that the proposal to reduce the size of the cohesion policy budget for the period 2021-2027 is unacceptable.
- believes that there is a need for a new ambitious and clear European strategy that is aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.
- must express in no uncertain manner its disappointment at the weakening of the cross border dynamic within cohesion policy.
- welcomes the stronger link with the European Semester and also calls for integration with the country-specific recommendations as a means of encouraging structural reforms.
- expects a stronger link between the European level investment strategy and that of Member States.
- points out that at EU level there is no structured involvement of civil society organisations in the process of monitoring the implementation of cohesion policy.
- strongly recommends that the Commission establish a European civil society cohesion forum with the participation of the social partners, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. Through this forum the Commission can consult the social partners and CSOs annually on the state of implementation of cohesion policy throughout the different programming cycles.

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Read the Brochure: [https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/breaking_down_the_barriers_0.pdf](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/breaking_down_the_barriers_0.pdf)

The EESC:

- believes that the vitality of the EU depends to a great extent on a strong European identity and on citizens’ identifying with the EU, while preserving national self-identity, and that the success of the European project is based on its values, tolerance and a commitment to diversity of cultures, religions and heritage. Therefore, it is important to strengthen citizens’ knowledge and understanding of EU history and culture, fundamental values and rights, core principles and decisions, and the decision-making processes at EU level. It is also important to advocate global citizenship and the role of the EU as a global actor.

- underlines that holistic education, training and lifelong learning (LLL) have an essential role to play in strengthening EU identity, a sense of community and belonging, and responsibility of EU citizens, encouraging their active participation in decision-making about the EU.

- emphasizes that learning happens everywhere and constantly, actively and passively. Therefore, education about the EU is not only a task for formal education and does not only concern young people. Both “life-wide” and “lifelong” education should be supported and a special focus should be put on older generations, with means of providing information adapted to their ways of learning.

The EESC:

- presents The WhiteDoveWay, a metaphorical and physical route map pointing the way forward, focusing on conflict prevention, civil society involvement, and effective communication using education and information, and a European Path of Peace to physically engage citizens so they are included and empowered in the EU peace process

- calls for the new EU budget to devote greatly increased funds to conflict prevention in all EU external relations peace programmes

- proposes that a path of peace go through places of former war and conflict, and a “virtual” trail offering a high-tech history book of the EU journey encouraging the EU values of respect, tolerance and mutual understanding

- strongly recommends greater involvement of civil society in the decision-making process

- urges the EU to create a new Global Peace-building Strategy with three strands: conflict prevention, civil society, coherence; Information, Communication, Education (ICE); European path of peace.

SOC/612 – Education about the European Union

The EESC:

- proposes The White Dove Way – Proposal for an EU-led Global Peace-building strategy

REX/504 – The White Dove Way – Proposal for an EU-led Global Peace-building strategy

The EESC:

- presents The White Dove Way, a metaphorical and physical route map pointing the way forward, focusing on conflict prevention, civil society involvement, and effective communication using education and information, and a European Path of Peace to physically engage citizens so they are included and empowered in the EU peace process

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- urges the EU to create a new Global Peace-building Strategy with three strands: conflict prevention, civil society, coherence; Information, Communication, Education (ICE); European path of peace.
The EESC welcomed the promoters of the STOP EXTREMISM European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) at its March plenary session. Mr Laubsch and Mr Reimer presented the goal of their initiative and shared their concerns about extremism.

Mr Laubsch explained that one of the aims of the initiative is to break up the ‘EU fatigue’ regarding extremist structures in Europe. The main purpose of the initiative is to bring together EU politics, the EU institutions and the European citizens to discuss how to challenge all the current forms of extremism – right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline. ‘Hate is starting to disrupt our society. The Rule of Law is about to break down. Implementation is lagging behind. States are worried about terrorism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline. The current forms of extremism – right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline. The current forms of extremism – right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline. The current forms of extremism – right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline. The current forms of extremism – right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, religiously motivated extremism, hate speech on- and offline.’

The ECI calls for a non-partisan and European example which could play a role within the EU, but also outside the EU. The fight against foreign funding from extremist structures is also pointed out. ‘The European Union needs to answer the big questions that the Member States cannot answer (…) 1.6 million signatures can prove that the EU citizens want the EU institutions to act.’

Mr Reimer, legal expert and author of the initiative, added that a clear-cut definition of extremism is needed in order to act and to give concrete solutions. He stressed that what extremists do fear is transparency. The ECI is calling therefore for publishing an online watch-list which would give authorities the chance to avoid extremists. ‘On the other hand we should also cherish and boost the people who are working on and improving the implementation of fundamental rights.’

The initiators’ presentation was followed by a debate during which Members of the Diversity Europe Group intervened.

Mr Lohan stressed the importance of looking at the causes of extremism and the rise of populism in the EU. After the collapse of the financial system, was the solution really to rebuild the same system again using austerity policies?, he questioned. ‘The message we get from those in power is that we have recovered fully. However, the reality people are feeling is quite different. It creates a complete disconnect between those in power, industry, lobbyists, financial sector, governments and the citizens who are on the ground. I think that this creates a fertile breeding ground for populism, for extremism, for fake news, for misinformation. Legitimate concerns get swallowed up by extremism. The work we have done within this Committee and the opportunity for a new European Commission and a new European Commission is to use the tools in order to address citizens’ problems.’ He then referred to the Sustainable Development Goals ‘which are about balancing social, environmental rights with the economic needs, about looking at rights of people and rights of nature and addressing those in the context of our economy.’

Mr Longo gave several examples of extremism which took place in Italy. He referred to attacks, rhetoric and extremist symbolic gestures. ‘The European Commission acts very swiftly when it regards finance. Where are these actions when it comes to extremism?’ he asked.

Mr Patrick Bernasconi, President of the French Economic and Social Committee, opened the second debate highlighting the need for visibility of economic and social councils and the necessary role of participatory democracy. ‘The Gilets Jaunes are one of the many warning signs: we need a better balance between participation and representation’, he added.

Several of our Group Members intervened. Mr Ivaşcu took the floor as Rapporteur of the Opinion on the Future of Europe and explained the content of the document. ‘We feel that democracy, the rule of Law are major values, the very root of the EU. They cannot be forgotten. (…) One should not lose sight of the social dimension. He added that we need stronger links with citizens.’ Ms Morrice said: ‘What we need to do more than anything is to inspire our young people, to hope for the future. The White Dove Way is a way of putting the peace at the very forefront. Mr Balon asked clarifications with regard to the ‘gilets jaunes’. Ms Raunemaa put emphasis on attitudes which are fostered during the childhood and on the role of families and education which influence the future. Ms Cser highlighted that ‘it would be a mistake to only deal with young people’ and stressed on the importance of families and related policies. Mr Schwartz raised environmental issues and current social challenges. ‘When you look at the young people demonstrating in the streets, they are very committed. They want the actions being taken. How can we do to support them?’ he asked.

Ms Savigny sees threats to European values (human rights, democracy, human dignity, justice, separation of the states and the judiciary), to freedom of speech. She said: ‘There are a lot of citizens who criticize the EU. (…) We need to discuss what the term ‘extremism’ means. We need to be more precise. If we talk about stopping any social movements, any hope of changing things, then NO! What we really need to do at the moment is fight inequality. We need to combat poverty.’
Contribution by Dilyana Slavova, REX Section President, Member of the Diversity Europe Group

On 6 March an excellent initiative of SOC, REX and Vice-President of Communication took place on the EESC premises. A 2015 film entitled ‘The Man Who Mends Women’ was shown, with a follow-up discussion on the work of Dr. Mukwege, the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2018.

Dr. Mukwege is the eleventh African to have won the prestigious award. He has spent more than two decades treating appalling injuries inflicted on women in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They call him ‘Doctor Miracle’ for his surgical skill and dedication in helping women overcome the injuries and trauma of sexual abuse and rape. The 450-bed Panzi hospital that he found-ed treats more than 3,500 women a year - though not all for sexual abuse, providing free consultations and performing reconstructive surgery on women who have suffered serious internal injuries.

Dr. Mukwege has been previously honored by the United Nations and has received many other international awards, including the Olof Palme Prize in January 2009 and the Sakharov Prize in 2014. In September 2016, he also won the Seoul Peace Prize.

‘Our common humanity calls on us to care for each other’ is the main message of Dr Mukwege. We as civil society representatives are responsible this message to become true!

Cultural event at the EESC

Joint SOC–REX: Communication Event to commemorate the International Day of Women

Event information:
https://europa.eu/!YY64VH

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

A Europe of Shared Values and Civil Society
Extraordinary Group III Meeting in Bucharest

On the 7th of May our Group held a high-level conference at the Atrium of the National Library of Romania, in Bucharest. The core topic was ‘A Europe of Shared Values and Civil Society’. Only two days before the EU Summit in Sibiu on the Future of the EU, the conference in Bucharest addressed three fundamental dimensions to the topic, from the perspective of European civil society:

- Guaranteeing European Values and Fundamental Rights
- The Changing Role of European Civil Society
- The Future of the EU

The event gathered EESC Members from all EU Member States, Romanian civil society organisations, academia representatives, and representatives of the Presidency of the Romanian Council of the EU.

More info related to this event in our next newsletter which will be released in June.

Voluntary Sector Category

On the 24th of April the Voluntary Sector Category chaired by Mr Trantina and Mr Roirant organized a meeting in which some organizations were invited to present their campaigns for the election of the European Parliament which is taking place in 23-26th of May. The presented campaigns were #Vote for children campaign presented by Mr Creeney (Communications Officer, Terre des Hommes), the Manifesto for a Sustainable Europe for its Citizens presented by Mr Clerck (Coordinator Economic Justice Program, Friends of the Earth Europe), Make Europe Great for All campaign, together with ‘Berlin agenda’ presented by Ms Najmowicz (Director of European Civic Forum), Trans Europa Caravans campaign presented by Mr Markovic (Director of ECIT Foundation), as well as #ChangeIsComing campaign which was presented by Mr Balate (Policy and Advocacy Director of the European Youth Forum).

All the participating organizations suggested ways in which the EESC, and its members could get involved in their election campaigns, and welcomed future cooperation with the Committee. On that occasion the category also adopted its work programme.

Liberal Professions Category

The next Liberal Professions category meeting will be held on 21 May from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the EESC. On the agenda: the organisation of the Day of the Liberal Professions on 13 November, the preparation of a half day discussion on liberal professions issues in the INT Section and a question and answer session on a EC study on effects of regulation on service quality.

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

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