The EESC's activities during the Austrian Presidency

July – December 2018

European Economic and Social Committee
Austria is taking up the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a very important moment in which the Union is thinking very deeply about how to drive forward a sustainable future for the European project. The institutional cycle is also nearing its end, bringing with it a faster pace of negotiations on many outstanding issues and the start of discussions on the new institutional cycle. The Austrian presidency is also the last of the trio involving Estonia and Bulgaria and will thus have a key role in ensuring that the goals they jointly assumed are achieved.

Austria has always been a bridge between the east and the west of the continent. In the course of its presidency, too, it will have the challenge of making sure, as President Juncker said in his State of the Union address, that Europe is breathing with both its lungs, east and west. We therefore look forward to working together with the Austrian presidency in making sure that the Union embraces and builds its future as a whole based on those shared values and aspirations which are common throughout our Union, from east to west and from north to south.

The EESC has a long tradition of working together with all the presidencies. We intend, more than ever, to continue this collaboration with the Austrian presidency, since we are both fully aware of the magnitude of the challenges that the European Union has to face. We look forward to working together on the EU’s enlargement policy and its relations with the Western Balkans, and in relations with Turkey, the Euromed region and our Eastern Neighbours, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, with whom we work in our Civil Society Platforms.

Without any doubt, one of the most important issues for the Austrian presidency will be the successful negotiation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which was published in May 2018. It is fundamental to ensure a fair, effective and, despite the challenging situation, ambitious budget for the European Union for the seven years to come and we are ready to take our share of responsibility. We must ensure that the MFF will enable the European Union to drive through forward-looking and innovative measures which will ensure the future of our democracy.

The protection of Europe’s borders and the reform of the Common European Asylum System will also be important topics on which the Union will require resolute action. The European Economic and Social Committee stands ready to contribute and to share its valuable input on these issues, building on the first-hand experience of its members on the ground. Strategies must be found which are built on open
dialogue and mutual understanding, taking our interconnected world into account and promoting development and peace.

The completion of the Digital Single Market will remain one of the top EU political priorities in 2018, including of the Austrian presidency. The EESC will continue providing expertise on topics of paramount importance, in particular the data economy and cyber security, which are essential preconditions for boosting productivity, innovation and employment in Europe and ensuring the future of democratic decision-making.

Another key topic for the Austrian presidency will be the challenge of achieving a fair and transparent agreement with the United Kingdom by the end of 2018. We should be pragmatic in reaching an agreement that can maintain a working and close relationship between the Union and the UK, especially in the interest of the citizens.

Furthermore, as the debate on the future of the EU continues, the Austrian presidency will also play a key role in making sure that the debates and decisions take us towards a sustainable future for Europe that reflects the needs of inclusive and open societies and their citizens. A renewed shared sense of belonging and purpose must be generated among Europe's citizens through a new narrative based on a reconnection to the basic European values, to our shared and multi-layered cultural heritage and on openness to dialogue with the world. The European Year of Cultural Heritage should be an opportunity for European institutions to reforge their relationship with Europe's citizens in a creative manner, building on the enormous power of culture to unite people across generations, cultures and backgrounds.

Last but not least, a new institutional cycle opens very soon for the Union, with the European elections approaching. While the EESC, as the home of organised civil society in Europe, commemorates its 60th anniversary in 2018 and stands ready to make the crucial voice of civil society heard as much as possible in the debate on the future of the Union, we understand the value of the lessons learnt from the past and the importance of looking forward.

With this in mind, we strongly believe that it is essential for all European institutions, including during the Austrian presidency, to join hands and encourage a strong turnout in the forthcoming European elections. These will provide the necessary legitimacy not only for the European Parliament but also for the entire Union in our important endeavour of putting together the narratives and aspirations to build our common future.

Luca JAHIER,
President of the EESC

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The Austrian members of the EESC 2015-2018

Alfred GAJDOSIK  
**Diversity Europe Group**  
Vice-chair of the Austrian Federal Group of Christian Trade Unionists (FCG), board member of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), chair of the Austria-Tunisia Friendship Association, mandate for the Consumer Protection Association (VKI)  
a.gajdosik@kbsi.at

Rudolf KOLBE  
**Diversity Europe Group**  
Austrian Federal Conference of the Liberal Professions, president of the Chamber of Architects and Consultants for Engineering for the Federal Land of Upper Austria and the Federal Land of Salzburg  
kolbe@kolbe.at

Wolfgang GREIF  
**Workers’ Group**  
Head of the Department for Europe, Corporations and International Relations of the Union of Private Sector Employees, Printing, Journalism, and Paper (GPA-djp)  
wolfgang.greif@gpa-djp.at

Ferdinand MAIER  
**Employers’ Group**  
Secretary general, Österreich-Hilfsbereit and former secretary general of the Austrian Raiffeisen Banking Association  
ferdinand.maier@oerv.raiffeisen.at office@ferrymaier.at

Michael IKRATH  
**Employers’ Group**  
Former secretary general of the Austrian Association of Savings Banks, member of the Nationalrat (retired)  
mi@michaelikrath.eu

Gerhard RIEMER  
**Employers’ Group**  
Consultant to the Federation of Austrian Industries, member of the Austrian Science Board, president of FIBAA, deputy chair of the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD  
gerhard.riemer@iv.at

Thomas KATTNIG  
**Workers’ Group**  
Member of the Federal Presidium of younion_Die Daseinsgewerkschaft of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB)  
thomas.kattnig@younion.at

Oliver RÖPKE  
**Workers’ Group**  
Head of the Brussels Office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB)  
oliver.roepke@oegb-eu.at
The EESC’s activities during the Austrian Presidency

Christa SCHWENG
Employers’ Group
Department for Social Policy and Health, Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKÖ)
christa.schweng@wko.at

Andreas THURNER
Diversity Europe Group
Head of the Austrian Agriculture Chamber’s Brussels office
a.thurner@lk-oe.at

Thomas WAGNSONNER
Workers’ Group
Head of the Employee Interests Sector at the Lower Austria Chamber of Labour
thomas.wagnsonner@aknoe.at

The Austrian delegation of the EESC officially has 12 members. The Council of the EU will proceed to the nomination of the 12th member in the course of the second semester 2018.
The EESC’s activities during the Austrian Presidency

One of the most important priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the Council will be the successful negotiation of a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for Europe. The Committee will contribute its position to the proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, which was published in May 2018 and will cover the period starting in 2021 (in particular, on the Multi-annual Financial Framework Regulation, and on instrument(s) on own resources). In doing so, it will build on the policy recommendations set out in its opinions on the midterm review of the MFF 2014-2020, the Reflection paper on the future of EU finances, the Reflection paper on the social dimension of the EU and the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as its follow-up work on a coherent approach to funding the fight against poverty under the new MFF and on the Sustainable Development Goals. It will also follow up on the recommendations of its own-initiative opinion entitled A performance-based EU budget focused on real results.

Within the on-going debate on the economic future of Europe, the Committee will stay actively involved in the follow-up to the Commission’s legislative and non-legislative proposals launched as part of the Economic and Monetary Union package in December 2017. In accordance with the Leaders’ Agenda, the European Council is expected to discuss these proposals and to agree on further action in the run-up to the European Summit in Sibiu in 2019. In addition, as part of the European semester process, the EESC will make a number of recommendations on the euro area economic policy to be pursued in 2019 and beyond.

Regarding taxation, the EESC is drawing up an own-initiative opinion on taxation in the digitalised economy and an opinion on a proposal establishing rules at EU level allowing taxation of profit generated by multinationals through the digital economy.

As regards the stability of the financial markets and the financing of the economy, the period ahead will be marked by work on the proposals aimed to complete the Capital Markets Union and the Banking Union. In particular, the Committee will draw up its opinions on: a package of proposals to tackle non-performing loans in Europe; an action plan on sustainable finances and the follow-up measures; the financial technology (FinTech) initiatives; a proposal to reduce barriers to cross-border distribution of investment funds; an initiative to create a European covered bonds framework; a framework on crowd and peer-to-peer finance as well as a proposal to develop a framework for European sovereign bond-backed securities.

In the course of the Austrian Presidency, the EESC intends to devote particular attention to Cohesion policy post 2020. The EESC will draw up opinions on the proposed new legislative framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds post 2020, which will govern cohesion policy in the next programming period. The Committee will also continue its work on the development of urban areas, supporting the implementation of the EU Urban Agenda and focusing on the refinement of this European
Finally, the EESC will continue its active participation in the implementation of macro-regional strategies as well as other European programmes.

The levels of inequality, poverty, social exclusion and unemployment are still alarming and there is a lot of divergence between regions and countries in the EU. The EESC will continue focusing on the preservation and improvement of the European social model, placing special emphasis on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed at the Gothenburg Social Summit on Fair Jobs and Growth. The Committee’s activities will include opinions on transparent and predictable working conditions, the European Labour Authority, access to social security, a minimum income and minimum standards in the field of unemployment insurance in the Member States. Special attention will be paid to measures that increase the quality of employment and removing barriers to integration into the labour market for young people, women, people with a migrant or ethnic minority background and especially for the long-term unemployed and people living in poverty. This will include an own-initiative opinion on employment opportunities for economically inactive people. The EESC will also deal with Commission initiatives under the new skills agenda, as well as on education, culture and youth. This will include the mutual recognition of diplomas, language learning and early childhood education and care.
The EESC will also address supportive education systems to avoid skills mismatches in an own-initiative opinion. In order to address the high and persistent level of poverty in the EU, it will make proposals for earmarking funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion within a new ESF to operate under the next Multiannual Financial Framework and continue its work with specific marginalised groups.

The Committee will continue to look at the impact of the digital transition and the transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient and green economy on employment, skills, social security and labour law. At the request of the Austrian Presidency, the EESC will draw up an opinion on EU concepts for transition management in a digitalised world of work and it will work on social dialogue for innovation in the digital economy on its own initiative.

The EESC will maintain its efforts to strengthen the rule of law and fundamental rights with the setting up of a new group on these issues that will support organised civil society in the Member States, enhance the role of civil society in preventing radicalisation, fight discrimination and exclusion, particularly with regard to the Roma and people with disabilities, promote gender equality and raise the visibility of civil society organisations working in these fields. The EESC will address the persistently high gender pay gap in the EU (above 16% on average), as well as, at the request of the European Parliament, the
general situation of women in the labour market and, more particularly, the gender digital gap, the situation of women with disabilities and of Roma women.

The Committee will continue to support a more open migration and truly common asylum policy based on greater solidarity and shared responsibility in the European Union. It will work to ensure better recognition of the contribution that migrants make to Europe’s economy and society, promote their integration into the labour market and society at large, advocate the improvement of their education and training and continue to call for their fundamental rights to be fully respected.

In relation to agriculture and rural development, the EESC will focus on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with an opinion on the legal proposal presented on 1st June 2018. In order to support the implementation of the Cork 2.0 Declaration “A Better Life in Rural Areas”, the Committee will prepare an own-initiative opinion on “The contribution of Europe’s rural areas to the 2018 Year of Cultural Heritage ensuring sustainability and urban/rural cohesion”.

Through its Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems, the EESC will uphold its call for a comprehensive food policy to facilitate the transition to more sustainable food systems. Such a policy would ensure better coherence and integration of food-related policy objectives and instruments and create an enabling framework for civil society initiatives on sustainable food that are emerging at national, regional and local level.

Apart from continuing its important efforts in the development of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, the EESC will work on new key initiatives relating to the EU Circular Economy Action Plan. Following a request from the Austrian Presidency in 2018, the EESC will prepare an exploratory opinion on how the bio-economy can contribute to achieving the EU’s climate and energy goals, and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among opinions foreseen for 2018 are a legislative proposal on waste water reuse, an EU plastics strategy and a Communication on the interface between chemicals, waste and product legislations. In the wider environmental field, EESC opinions will also be drawn up on a revision of the EU drinking water directive, EU actions to improve environmental compliance and governance, and a revision of an EU regulation on persistent organic pollutants.

Contributing to the practical implementation of the 17 global SDGs, as initiated by the United Nations in 2015, will continue to rank high on the EESC’s agenda. The Committee will actively participate in the Multi-stakeholder Platform for Sustainable Development in the EU created in June 2016 by the Commission, notably by providing practical recommendations related to monitoring of implementation of the SDGs. The EESC will hold a multi-stakeholder SDG implementation conference with Member State involvement.

In the field of climate action, the EESC is part of an International Climate Governance Coalition (ICGC) which aims to stimulate the bottom-up
The EESC’s activities during the Austrian Presidency

engagement of various actors in a multi-stakeholder and multi-level spirit of cooperation. The EESC will promote the creation of an enabling framework for the citizen and community-led climate initiatives through the launch of a European Dialogue for Non-State Climate Action. It will also draw up an opinion on a climate/finance pact with the aim to propose new mechanisms to raise the level of climate finance to the level of the ambition of the Paris Agreement. At COP24 in Katowice, the EESC will therefore come up with concrete proposals related to promoting both climate finance and bottom-up climate actions.

A large part of the EESC’s activities will continue to focus on the completion of the single market in its various aspects. New economic models will remain high on the EESC’s agenda. The Committee has been at the forefront of dealing with these trends and will continue to monitor developments, but will take a more coordinated approach, clearly linking the role that these new trends play in facing Europe’s sustainability challenges. For some years now, our societies have seen the introduction of new technologies and ways of doing things (digitalisation, the circular economy, the collaborative economy, “uberisation”, etc.) that are profoundly disrupting business, professional, political and civic practices. This major upheaval primarily affects the younger generation and should – now more than ever – be the focus of our concerns. The Committee therefore wishes to open a cross-cutting and comprehensive discussion on this issue in order to shape an approach which will take us up to 2050. It expects the Austrian Presidency to contribute to an innovative discussion at European level, since national solutions will not be sufficient. The EESC will also move forward with its work in the area of the social enterprise and the social economy. In addition to monitoring and evaluating political developments at EU and Member State level, it will identify specific measures to improve the general environment of social economy enterprises, disseminate best practices in the Member States and raise the sector’s profile. In this context, the EESC held the third European Day of Social Economy Enterprises in June 2018.

The EESC will also closely follow the Commission’s New Deal for Consumers, which is an element of EU Consumer Policy. In addition to preparing an opinion on this topic the EESC is collaborating closely with the European Commission and the Council Presidency in the public initiatives taking place in the context of this New Deal.

The EESC is also very active in the field of research and innovation. Here, the opinion on Artificial Intelligence is a major landmark and the EESC’s work has been cited on several occasions. In order to keep our high profile and respected status, it is crucial to continue to following developments in this area. In this context, the EESC will work on an own-initiative opinion on the effects of AI on employment.

At the request of the Austrian Presidency, the EESC will draft exploratory opinions on industrial policy and on the impact of subsidiarity and gold plating on the economy and employment. The promotion of SMEs in Europe is a major concern for the EESC, which will now draw the conclusions of the national debates conducted
in six Member States to discuss the best way of improving the business environment for SMEs in Europe.

As far as industry is concerned, the EESC will continue its sectoral approach and examine the imminent challenges for the aeronautics sector in the face of current national and international challenges. The aerospace sector is of major strategic importance to the EU and is under increasing threat by globalisation and increasing competition. Because of the integrated supply chains involved, recent EU-developments pose the threat of substantial change to this sector. The EESC will also explore new opportunities for the European economy provided by a sustainable inclusive bio-economy. We are currently witnessing an industrial transition from fossil to bio based raw materials. Another sectoral related topic will be Europe’s woodworking industry. The international wood industries have become more complex due to globalisation, production assortment and the development of technologies. In the last ten years, the European wood industries have undergone a significant decline, coupled with structural changes in world markets and a subsequent volatility of the availability of many wood species. It is time for the EESC to re-address the challenges of this sector. The EESC will also hold the first three round tables dedicated to the topic of “Platform for Coal Regions in Transition” in the Czech Republic,
Bulgaria and Germany. This initiative is closely coordinated with the European Commission’s Coal Platform exercise and will also be continued in 2019.

The completion of the Digital Single Market (DSM) will remain one of the top EU political priorities in 2018. The EESC will continue providing expertise on topics of paramount importance, in particular data economy and cyber security that are essential conditions for boosting productivity, innovation and employment in Europe.

The EESC will work on specific legislative proposals deriving from the DSM package and the third data package published in April by the European Commission. The DSM initiatives address online platform challenges as regards the spreading of fake information and unfair trading practices in platform-to-businesses relationships. The data package, on the other hand, is a set of measures directed towards delivering on the DSM and thus unblocking the huge potential of the European data economy. The work will include initiatives on accessibility and reuse of public and publicly-funded data and a REFIT initiative on Domain Name “.eu”.

Building on the Commission’s recently presented cybersecurity package setting out concrete measures as a response to new cyber-threats, the EESC will continue to work intensively and propose measures that aim to foster consumer trust in electronic commerce. At the same time, as a follow up to the initiative on free flow of data laying the foundations for an easier, ever increasing flow of non-personal data among Member States, the EESC will seek to encourage the exchange of data also in the business sphere. To that end, a legal framework has to be
designed that facilitates secure and safe trading of data, being at the same time sufficiently flexible to allow businesses of all sizes to create a confident environment, to increase benefits and to stimulate innovation.

The EESC will build on its previous opinions on the European Energy Union and continue to draw up opinions in this area. Following the extensive work on the ten opinions in response to the European Commission’s “Clean Energy for All Europeans” package, the Committee will continue its efforts to make EU energy policies more relevant to the everyday life of citizens and civil society. Specifically, the EESC will focus, firstly, on closely monitoring and engaging with the EU Energy Poverty Observatory and ensuring that the social dimension of the Energy Union remains at the heart of the Energy Union programme. Secondly, it will draw up an opinion on the fourth state of the Energy Union report that reflects the priorities and interests of citizens and civil society in the pursuit of the Energy Union objectives. The Committee also intends to further strengthen its priority work on the European Energy Dialogue aimed at raising awareness among civil society organisations of the energy transition and in turn to convey the interests, needs and concerns of civil society to EU decision-makers. This priority work of involving civil society and citizens has acquired renewed urgency and relevance as the governance of the Energy Union is being discussed between the Council, European Parliament, and the European Commission. To this end, the EESC will strive for a strong presence at the European Commission’s annual Citizens’ Energy Forum in Dublin.

In the field of transport, the Committee will continue to focus its work on maintaining and enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of the European transport sector by developing intermodal and multimodal transport. The EESC will closely follow the Commission’s ongoing mobility package initiatives focusing
on the four overarching themes, namely a well-functioning competitive internal market, decarbonisation, digitalisation and the social dimension of the transport sector. More particularly, the Committee will look into initiatives coming from the 3rd mobility package published by the Commission in May 2018, including proposals to facilitate recognition of e-documentation in transport, simplify reporting formalities for ships, and to improve road safety in the EU.

At the same time, the EESC will further advocate the implementation of the Connecting Europe Facility and the TEN-T policy. Finally, as a follow-up to its recent activities, the Committee will also closely follow the digitalisation and automation trends in transport and the “EU Platform for Change” aiming to increase women’s employability and thus gender equality in the transport sector. A major conference will be organised in cooperation with the Austrian presidency in order to discuss the current development and trends in the transport sector and to promote the dialogue between public authorities and civil society when dealing with them.
The Committee will continue to promote the provision of **services of general interest** in a competitive and fairer single market, where every European citizen has the right to access essential, affordable and high-quality goods and services.

Regarding the EU’s external action policies, the Committee will focus its priority action on a peaceful **neighbourhood** and on **enlargement policies**.

The Austrian Presidency will be involved in the EESC’s work on the EU’s enlargement policy and its relations with the **Western Balkans**. The EESC will closely follow EU-Turkey relations, at a time when civil society dialogue is more necessary than ever. The improvement of civil society participation in the **Euromed** region will also be a key topic for the EESC under the Austrian Presidency. Regarding the **Eastern Neighbours**, active involvement of the Civil Society Platforms with **Georgia**, **Moldova** and **Ukraine** will be the main priority. The Committee will invite the Austrian Presidency to participate in the various civil society bodies that input into our relations with those countries.

The Committee will pursue its active involvement in the civil society bodies that monitor trade agreements. Special attention will be paid to the agreements with **Canada**, **Japan**, **Morocco**, **Chile**, **Mexico** and **Mercosur**. The Presidency will be invited to follow up on the EESC’s work on those agreements.

Finally, the Committee will continue its work with its partner organisations around the world, such as in **China**, **Africa**, **Latin America and the Caribbean** and **Russia**. The EESC will pay special attention to horizontal issues such as the EU strategy on **international cultural relations**.

Culture in a broad sense will also be the theme of the 10**th** edition of the EESC civil society prize, which will have a total value of EUR 50 000 to be shared among up to five winners and will be open to civil society organisations and individuals. The prize award ceremony will take place on 13 December 2018.
A word from the Austrian Presidency

Taking up the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union is a big responsibility and great privilege at the same time. This will be the third time for Austria to assume this role. The European Union and its Member States faced serious challenges over the last couple of years. The Union has to be in a position to meet these challenges and deliver concrete results for its citizens. This is now more important than ever.

Significant decisions have to be taken in the coming years. For the first time a Member State will leave the EU. Current developments in international affairs seem to increase uncertainty and anxiety. Economic and social foundations are being shaken by the forces of globalisation and digitalisation. We, the Member States and all institutions of the European Union, have to prepare ourselves and be ready to shape these developments – in order to safeguard our European way of life. If we want to have the public on board, we must – as a matter of priority - bring the Union closer to the European citizens.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) plays an important role in this endeavour. The EESC offers a valuable platform for an open discussion and dialogue on different ideas and proposals, connecting citizens, regions, institutions and social partners. The Austrian Presidency highly values the role of the EESC and we are looking forward to a close cooperation and a fruitful exchange of views.

Austria appreciates the very constructive cooperation with our trio partners Estonia and Bulgaria. Together we delivered an ambitious work programme, addressing major challenges the Union is facing. As the last partner of the current trio, it will be one of Austria’s priorities to finalise as many open dossiers as possible. We want to contribute as much as possible to decisive progress before the European elections in late spring 2019.

During Austria’s six months at the helm of the Council of the European Union, we will focus on topics which are important to European citizens and where the European Union must achieve progress.

The general motto of the Austrian Council Presidency is “A Europe that protects”. Developments in recent years had a negative impact on the trust of citizens in the Union. This trust has to be restored. The Union must be capable of
ensuring peace and stability. Therefore, the EU’s ability to provide effective security will be the focus of the Austrian Presidency, based on three pillars.

The first pillar is “Security and fight against illegal migration”. This remains a major challenge for the EU and its Member States. It is of utmost importance that the EU is able and capable to act. Significant progress has already been achieved but strong and sustainable solutions regarding the protection of external borders, fighting terrorism and preventing radicalisation still have to be found. These challenges can only be successfully met if we work together on the European level.

The second pillar of the Austrian programme is “Securing prosperity and competitiveness – focus on digitalisation”. The EU is still one of the leading trading powers as well as the biggest single market in the world. The digital transformation is a powerful development, which has to be used to secure the EU’s prosperity and competitiveness, as well as the sustainability of the EU’s economy. Trust of our citizens in the digital world has to be strengthened and the Union needs to possess the necessary tools to counter cyber threats. At the same time, we need to ensure a level playing field which includes a European response to the dominant position of global internet corporations.

The third pillar of the Austrian programme is “Stability in the neighbourhood and further EU-rapprochement of the states of the Western Balkans / Southeast-Europe”. This is and will remain a traditional priority of Austria. We will build on progress achieved during the Bulgarian EU-Presidency and support all efforts for a continued integration of the region in the European structures.

Austria’s approach in all these efforts will be based on the reinforcement of the principle of subsidiarity. This principle has not always been coherently and effectively applied. We therefore welcome the establishment of the “Task Force on subsidiarity, proportionality and doing less more efficiently” and look forward to its findings. Austria believes that the EU has to focus on essential issues and challenges, where common solutions are necessary. At the same time, the Union has to take a step back on smaller issues, leaving room for regional and national solutions – and, by doing so, live up to its own motto “United in Diversity”.

Austria is looking forward to contributing to our common European agenda in close cooperation with the EESC. I am confident that together we will be able to achieve progress on those issues which are close to our citizens, making the Union stronger and more efficient.

Gernot BLÜMEL
Federal Minister for the EU, Arts, Culture and Media
## General information on Austria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Official name</strong></th>
<th>Republic of Austria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capital</strong></td>
<td>Vienna</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Area</strong></td>
<td>83,900 km²</td>
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<td><strong>Other main towns (in terms of population)</strong></td>
<td>Graz, Linz, Salzburg, Innsbruck</td>
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<td><strong>National language</strong></td>
<td>German</td>
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<td><strong>Currency</strong></td>
<td>Euro</td>
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<td><strong>Population (2016)</strong></td>
<td>8,576,261</td>
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<td><strong>GDP in current prices (in millions of euro, 2016)</strong></td>
<td>36,300</td>
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<td><strong>GDP per capita (in Purchasing Power Standards [PPS], EU-28 = 100, 2016)</strong></td>
<td>128</td>
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<td><strong>Employment rate (persons aged 20-64 years, 2016)</strong></td>
<td>74.8%</td>
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<td><strong>Unemployment rate (2016)</strong></td>
<td>4.1%</td>
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<td>Vehicles, Electrical machinery, Machinery, Mechanical appliances, Iron and steel, Plastics, Pharmaceutical products</td>
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<td><strong>Main imports</strong></td>
<td>Vehicles, Electrical machinery, Machinery, Mechanical appliances, Plastics, Pharmaceutical products, Organic chemicals, Mineral fuels</td>
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<td><strong>Calling code</strong></td>
<td>+43</td>
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<td><strong>Time zone</strong></td>
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1/2/3 Europa.eu  
4/5/6 Eurostat  
7/8 Trademap

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The EESC’s activities during the Austrian Presidency
For your diary

Brussels

11/07/2018
Photo exhibition (EESC – Foyer 6th floor) and Austrian cultural evening

13/12/2018
2018 EESC Civil Society Prize – 10th edition

Vienna [or other city in Austria]

24-25/10/2018 (tbc)
Group I Bureau Extraordinary meeting

09/10/2018 | Vienna
Group II Extraordinary meeting

10-12/10/2018 | Feldkirch
Group III Extraordinary meeting