



**CONFERENCE ON**

# The future of democracy in Europe

**ATHENS, 1-2 MARCH 2018**

**SUMMARY**



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**Conference of the President of  
the European Economic and Social Committee  
on THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE  
Athens, Acropolis Museum, March 1–2, 2018**

**1<sup>st</sup> day - Thursday 1 March 2018**

9h00-9h30

Registration of participants

9h30-11h00

Opening: Democracy under pressure

Introductory session of the conference with the participation of high-profile political figures. The main theme is an overview of the different threats to European democracy and its fundamental values.

*Chair: Georges Dassis, President of the European Economic and Social Committee*

*Speakers:*

- *Efi Achtsioglou, Minister of Labour of the Hellenic Republic*
- *Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions*

11h00-11h30

Coffee break

11h30-13h00

**Panel 1: Open markets and Protectionism, Technocracy vs. Democracy**

This panel will discuss how the transparency of political processes together with open markets can create a strong and sustainable participative society. To enhance transparency, numerous consultation processes and bodies composed of various stakeholders have been established with the aim of bringing the European legislative process closer to the citizen. The panelists will examine the challenges and opportunities linked to these processes and how overregulation and bureaucratization can be tackled to the building and sustaining of open markets and a solid democracy in the EU.

*Chair: Jacek Krawczyk, President of Employers Group, EESC*

*Speakers:*

- *Georges Katrougalos, Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece*
- *George Vernikos, President of the Greek Economic and Social Council*
- *Jean-Marie Cambacères, President of the European and International Affairs Section of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council*
- *Sabine Selchow, Research Fellow, University of Sydney, and Research Associate, London School of Economics*
- *Sofia Katsina, Member of the Athens Bar Association, Member of the Executive Committee of the Greek Economic and Social Council*

Discussion with the audience

**13h00-15h00**

**Lunch**

**15h00-16h30**

**Panel 2: Populism and inequalities as major threats to democracy**

A populist rhetoric of various sorts is growing in strength across the democratic world in Europe and elsewhere. In turn, this is enhanced by the rise of inequalities - at all levels - in our society, the economic cost they entail and the problems they pose to social cohesion and to the very exercise of democracy.

*Chair: Gabriele Bischoff, President of the Workers' Group, EESC*

*Speakers:*

- *Yannis Panagopoulos, President of the Greek General Confederation of Labour*
- *Michael Hartmann, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Darmstadt Technical University*
- *Balázs Krémer, Associate professor, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Debrecen*
- *Efi Bekou, Member of the Executive Committee of the Greek Economic and Social Council*

Discussion with the audience

**16h30-17h00**

**Conclusions (first day)**



## 2<sup>nd</sup> day – Friday, 2 March 2018

9h30-11h00

### Panel 3: European federalism and national sovereignty (first part)

The third panel focuses on a broad debate on the possible future of European integration and the institutional architecture of the EU, considering the differing viewpoints between supporters of building a federal Europe and advocates of the sovereignty of nations in Europe.

*Chair: Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group, EESC*

*Speakers:*

- *Cecilia Wikström, President of the Conference of European Parliament Committee Chairs*
- *Patrick Bernasconi, President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council*
- *Conny Reuter, Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group*
- *Marco Lombardo, Professor at the University of Bologna, promoter of the "Rome Manifesto"*
- *Christopher Glück, President of Young European Federalists*

11h00-11h30

Coffee break

11h30-12h30

Panel 3: European federalism and national sovereignty  
(second part)

Discussion with the audience

12h30-13h00

Conclusions

- *Georges Dassis, President of the European Economic and Social Committee*
- *George Vernikos, President of the Greek Economic and Social Council*

Closing of the conference



## Opening: Democracy under pressure

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The opening session of the conference focused on the various threats posed to European democracy and its fundamental values.

**Georges Dassis**, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, opened the conference by reading the letter sent by European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker who greeted the conference. The President of the EESC highlighted the symbolism of the event taking place at the birthplace of democracy. He also emphasised the grave threats posed to modern democracies by populism, hatred and racism due to the crisis. He concluded by reassuring that the EESC will continue to be the home of participatory democracy, that promotes solidarity.

**Efi Ahtsioglou**, Minister of Labour of the Hellenic Republic, referred to the world economic crisis, which questions the very essence of democracy by exacerbating problems of democratic deficit within EU. The Minister also reflected critically on the role of the EU, Member-States and politicians in the current state of affairs, emphasising the impossibility to tackle inequalities through a system that inherently creates inequalities, aggravates disparities between north and south and social classes. Moreover, she added that tax havens safeguard accounts and possessions of an elite whilst people everywhere carry the burden of the crisis. She proposed three main priorities: more democratic control, accountability, and transparency in decision making with engagement by the citizens; stricter rules in the EU to combat tax evasion, tax havens and protect whistle-blowers in compliance with fundamental market rules; more social justice including individual and collective labour and social rights.

**Karl-Heinz Lambertz**, President of the European Committee of the Regions, accentuated the role of the two consultative bodies of the EU which provide orientation paving the way for the rest of the institutions. He analysed the major threats EU is facing, including the refugee crisis, high unemployment rates and poverty, and called for solidarity. Reproaching decision-making mechanisms in Brussels for failing to find solutions to problems of countries like Greece, he urged for openness towards EU citizens, for restituting democracy to its grassroots with fresh cohesion policies and investments and called for the redefinition of the concept of 'demos'. He concluded noting that a socially fair, powerful, and innovative EU is needed.



**George Vernikos**, President of the Greek Economic and Social Council, welcomed participants to Greece, underlined that all EU citizens are managing fears at the background of a confrontation between civilization and barbarity. Mr. Vernikos presented the historically first Prize of Social Dialogue to the President of the EESC Georges Dassis for his enduring commitment and promotion of social dialogue.

Emphasising the great honour bestowed on him, **President Georges Dassis** accepted the prize and thanked the Greek council and its members.

## Panel 1: Open markets and Protectionism, Technocracy vs. Democracy

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The first panel discussed how the transparency of political processes together with open markets can create a strong and sustainable participative society considering that to enhance transparency, numerous consultation processes and bodies composed of various stakeholders have been established with the aim of bringing the European legislative process closer to the citizen. Contributors examined the challenges and opportunities linked to these processes exploring how overregulation and bureaucratization can be tackled for building and sustaining of open markets and a solid democracy in the EU.



**Jacek Krawczyk**, President of Employers Group, EESC, launched the panel discussion by addressing the interconnection of open society, open markets, transparency and democracy expressing his belief that the EU historically remains one of the most successful democratic projects in the continent. Furthermore, he referred to Brexit, 'renationalization', and populism against a background marked by the liberalization of aviation and other industries, and trade agreements like CETA.

**Georges Katrougalos**, Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece, noted that technocracy should aim to support democracy. Referring to the challenge neoliberalism poses to democracy, he elaborated on financial orthodoxy, market deregulation, and the prevailing TINA (there is no alternative) stressing that democracy cannot exist without alternatives. Noting that the EU free market capitalism provides an excellent example of a system regulated by democratic means including labour law and social rights, the

Minister remarked that this model regrettably suffers from a crisis of identity. The answer to the crisis, he observed, is the democratization of EU structures, the designation of EU ministers for finance, social protection and labour, and pan-European ballots.

**Jean-Marie Cambacérés**, President of the European and International Affairs Section of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council praised the adaptability of the Greek government and examined current populism in contrast to the rampant 30s version that eventually prevailed. He also tackled the inequalities underpinned by free market and the negative aspects of technocracy. He concluded with four proposals: reintroducing civil EU education to schools; creating social and economic committees; connecting centers of civil society with centers of decision making, and establishing EU-wide ballots with one list.

**Sabine Selchow**, Research Fellow, University of Sydney, and Research Associate, London School of Economics, began with the premise that the world is uncertain and that institutions do not correspond to our realities anymore, something which creates further alienation. Ms Selchow considered the relationship between open markets and democracy highlighting the need for substantive democracy as the foundation of social integration and a steady social context. The need to foster a culture of debate beyond the EU parliament and institutions is of utmost importance, she said, yet in times of populism we need the diversity of expertise—not just different actors, but different disciplines as well.

**Sofia Katsina**, Member of the Athens Bar Association and Member of the Executive Committee of the Greek Economic and Social Council, addressed austerity, the inability of the EU status quo to tackle the crisis, which led to shrinking to democratic and social rights adversely changing the lives of Greeks and EU citizens. She stated that the very principles of EU are neglected and ignored under the pressure of economic fundamentalists, and that the system cannot continue by giving priority to fiscal adjustment only. Ms Katsina suggested that the EU should focus on real solutions with the help of technocrats, clarifying their role, which is to help without dictating. She presented a survey on democracy demonstrating that when citizens are limited to a debate without participation, they will seek other solutions, something already underway, for example, via internet democracy, online referenda, which entail the risk of derailment.

**George Vernikos**, President of the Greek Economic and Social Council, observed that the effort of the EU to bring together people from different backgrounds is a very difficult task and needs commitment by all. He highlighted the ongoing conflict between the new and the old, namely an institutional framework which dates back to the second industrial revolution failing to address fully the concerns of a modern world, such as an environment beneficial to entrepreneurship and a reinforced state. Regarding the EU, he underlined that it relies on shared values emphasising that without democracy, technocracy is not acceptable.

## Panel 2: Populism and inequalities as major threats to democracy

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The second panel focused on the rise of populism and inequalities in Europe and examined their interrelation. A populist rhetoric of various sorts is growing in strength across the democratic world in Europe and elsewhere. In turn, this is reinforced by the rise of inequalities - at all levels - in our society, the economic cost they entail and the problems they pose to social cohesion and to the very exercise of democracy.

**Gabriele Bischoff**, President of the EESC Workers' Group, opened the panel by stating that populism and inequalities constitute threats to democracy. She explained that populism can have different meanings according to political orientations. There are three main elements which characterize populism: conflictual relationships involving the élites, the idea of a national identity based on the exclusion of others, and the claim that populists represent the real interests of the people whereas all other political parties fail to understand their needs and expectations. The mobilization of populism is often a top down approach which is not a result of a collective action.

**Michael Hartmann**, Emeritus Professor of Sociology from the Darmstadt Technical University, explained that the large majority of elites in almost all industrialised countries over the last three decades applied policies aiming to deregulate financial and labor markets to lower taxes for high income categories and corporations, and to diminish social services for the majority of the population. Middle classes have lost the level of social benefits that went back to World War I, which shows how much inequalities have increased. Moreover, policies implemented by élites and supported by the media, have always been portrayed as lacking alternatives. Hence, people started to believe that they cannot any longer trust the political élite, something that is negative for democracy which requires trust and confidence to political parties.

**Balázs Krémer**, Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Debrecen, stressed that inequalities are directly linked to the question of poverty. Economists, Professor Krémer, explained, analyze the decline of the middle strata of society in terms of losses suffered during the last thirty years; these losses are somehow compensated through consumerism, credits and mortgages. Hence, middle classes have lost self-confidence as well as their prospects to influence situations and processes; this decline is also underpinned by fiscal distribution and taxation. Meanwhile faster and more manipulative communication and media, are incompatible with political decisions which have to be taken within due times, requiring slower processes and different stages, to test the impact of decisions taken.

**Yannis Panagopoulos**, President of the Greek General Confederation of Labour, stressed that the common denominator of all populists, reinforced by austerity policies, is to

oppose Europe and the social pact pretending they are the sole genuine representatives of the people. According to Mr. Panagopoulos, populism advances in Europe because of inequalities, insecurity, unemployment, deregulation of labor relations, and the dismantling of the welfare state. If we want a future for Europe, we must radically change



the economic model, the EU governance architecture, moving towards federalism, he suggested. Europe must succor the weakest in the labor market, introduce the minimum salary to fight inequalities and poverty, and create quality jobs, Mr. Panagopoulos concluded.

**Efi Bekou**, member of the Executive Committee of the Greek Economic and Social Council underlined that the respect of the gender equality is a very important tool of democracy; yet, the European and national *acquis* are not always applied in practice. The gaps between men and women in terms of their role in society and the labour market persist with significant discrepancies in terms of remuneration and working conditions. Ms. Bekou referred to violence against women, prostitution and trafficking as tremendous problems to be tackled and called for equal gender participation in decision making processes. She also noted that populism is incompatible with feminism and that it serves paternalism. Consequently, women have to consolidate their rights to allow democracy to operate better.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Panel of discussions: European federalism and national sovereignty

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The third panel focused on the possible future of European integration and the institutional architecture of the EU, considering the differing viewpoints between supporters of building a federal Europe and advocates of national sovereign states in Europe.

Launching the debate of the 3<sup>rd</sup> panel, **Luca Jahier**, President of Group III of the EESC and panel chair, declared that he had always been a militant of federalism recalling that article (1) of the current TEU obliges us to endeavour towards the creation of a closer Union. This, according to Mr. Jahier, translates as an obligation to bring decisions close to citizens. The dilemma between federalism and sovereign State is artificial, he emphasized; living in a globalised world, we need to seek balance at all levels, regional, local, international. Mr. Jahier also underlined the necessity to respond to the citizens' concerns of safety stressing that a failure to do so will encourage populism.



**Cecilia Wikström**, President of the Conference of European Parliament Committee Chairs stated that the EU should make greater use of citizens' experiences in drafting future legislation. She noted that the EU has failed to communicate to citizens its success stories, which may account for the rise of populism and nationalism. Noting that she strongly supports federal Europe, Ms. Wikström emphasized that the Commission has

to be a motor of integration and cooperation. The opt-outs weaken the decisive power of the Council, she stressed; however, we have to strengthen our cooperation, as it will bring along more solidarity.

**Patrick Bernasconi**, President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council stated that we cannot move forward without sovereign States. At the same time, EU institutions have to work to the citizens' benefit. Stressing the need for a balanced approach when addressing federalism vis-à-vis sovereign States, he also proposed that the Council should be more open and more flexible. Emphasising that the EU should not be abolished for failing in social matters, Mr. Bernasconi observed that such shortcomings should be remedied. EU politicians should get out of their golden cage and promote peace, security and prosperity, Mr. Bernasconi concluded, adding that the EU should stop printing documents and start listening to the citizens.

**Conny Reuter**, Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group stressed that national egoism is rising and therefore, democracy should not be taken for granted. Noting that we live in times of social nationalism, where many in Europe believe that social issues should be resolved at national level, Mr. Reuter expressed his satisfaction for the declaration of the pillar for social rights conveying the hope that this would lead to upward convergence. He also stressed that we have to stick to the treaties in order to achieve territorial and social cohesion. Asking whether lessons were drawn from Greece's plight owing to austerity policies, he concluded that the EU should make citizens feel that they are protected.

**Marco Lombardo**, Professor at the University of Bologna, promoter of the "Rome Manifesto" described his feelings upon seeing the Parthenon, whose beauty has enlightened his soul. Making a metaphorical reference, he compared the Parthenon to the EU noting that the Parthenon managed to resist changes, natural phenomena and economic earthquakes because the weight of its pillars was apportioned equally and because all pillars were separated by equal distance. This is why the Maastricht Treaty could not achieve stability, stressed Mr. Lombardo, briefly presenting the decision-making process in each EU pillar. EU democracy collapsed, he noted, because it didn't take into account citizenship, which is based on our shared values. He also emphasised the need to review the social contract, to invest in education and establish the true separation of powers within the EU.

**Christopher Glück**, President of Young European Federalists found that there is complacency in Brussels and all European capitals. He challenged the common belief that achieving a better economy, will solve all our problems. He noted that there are many hot issues currently in Europe; people do not feel safe anymore and they are forced to migrate in order to find a job. There is a general feeling that the EU does not provide adequate answers to issues exacerbated by globalization. Mr. Glück insisted that we need to define who is responsible for decision-making in Europe as well as appoint a European Minister for the economy because the Eurozone is incomplete in its present situation.

# Conclusions

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At the end of the conference, the President of the EESC Mr. Georges Dassis drew the conclusions of the 2-day debates.

Regarding the **1<sup>st</sup> panel of discussions** on open markets and protectionism/technocracy versus democracy, Mr. Dassis stated that the views expressed during this conference, strongly suggest that we need open markets and that we cannot accept protectionism in the EU. Concerning trade relations of the EU with other countries, he mentioned that every agreement has to be examined thoroughly and that CETA agreement provides a good example. Mr. Dassis stressed that a single market does not suffice to provide regulations for the well-being of the whole society; therefore, we need to provide regulations at the European level since without regulations, those already wealthy will further enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of our society.

Regarding the **2<sup>nd</sup> panel of discussions** on populism and inequalities as a major threat to democracy, the President concluded that we cannot combat populism only by words. When people live in misery, they are prepared to believe whatever they are being told. The solution lies in social policies, in investing in policies that ensure freedom and prosperity. Mr. Dassis also stressed the need for a minimum income in all member States, to be adjusted to the reality of each country. Inequalities create uncertainty, he underlined; we have to fight against all inequalities, including gender inequalities.

Regarding the **3<sup>rd</sup> panel debates** on federalism and national sovereignty, Mr. Dassis stated that a peaceful Europe is a federal Europe. Citizens who seek security tend to trust all those who promise security using lies and manipulation. The pillar of social rights must not remain a declaration; on the contrary, it needs to become legally binding, signed by all Member States. Underlining that the time is ripe to define the notion of participatory democracy, he noted that the EESC and the CSOs provide a large volume of participatory democracy in Europe and stressed the need for a European Minister of Finance because, as he said, the Eurogroup is not subject to any form of parliamentary control. The EESC President also reflected on the fast evolution of new technologies; noting the need for new skills and knowledge to be imparted to European citizens he reflected on the number of Europeans who are adept users of these technologies.

Mr. Dassis also emphasised that we should not allow the principle of subsidiarity to serve as pretext when things do not move forward but, we need, instead, to elaborate measures that address citizens directly. If EU citizenship is to become reality, then, Europe should be close to the people. Noting that the EU Parliament regrettably cannot decide on the election of the President of the Commission, Mr. Dassis stressed, that the Parliament, not the Council, should be competent to decide.

Mr. Dassis referred also to a 'nationalisation' of European affairs, as discussions focus mostly on national rather than European problems. Asking 'what kind of sovereignty we are talking about, Mr. Dassis questioned the ability of member States to respond unilaterally, especially in comparison with big countries such as Russia, the US and China, in light of the need for loans and the risk of new wars. "Our only force is to defend our common interests", Mr. Dassis concluded, "otherwise, this will be the end of our Union: our interests and hopes are vested in a free and democratic Europe".

**Mr. George Vernikos**, President of the Greek Economic and Social Council in his closing remarks said that, astonishingly, more than 200 years after the French revolution, we still debate the values of equality, freedom and fraternity. Emphasising that Europe has 24% of the world's GDP and 50% of social policy funds, he stressed that we should be committed to social dialogue while retaining the right to doubt, to challenge and to be efficient. Civil society organisations provide to citizens the tool to claim accountability; the tool everybody needs to move forward in a globalised world. People need equitable participation; social dialogue helps people overcome isolation emanating from fear.





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