The EESC's activities
during the Bulgarian Presidency

January – June 2018

European Economic and Social Committee
Bulgaria is taking up the presidency of the European Union at a crucial period for the Union, in which the cohesion and unity of its Member States are being tested.

I would first of all like to congratulate Bulgaria on its decision to make economic and social cohesion an immediate priority. As also provided for in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the EU aims to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among its Member States. The EESC has repeatedly stressed that significant investments are therefore required in order to bring about balanced development.

As also mentioned in the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency, brain drain is a tragic reality in several countries in eastern and southern Europe, giving rise to two fundamental needs:

1) the need to protect posted workers in other EU Member States as regards salary, working conditions and social security, and to avoid social dumping,

2) the need to create quality jobs in less affluent European countries, which will serve to counteract further depopulation of the regions concerned.

The role of the social economy is crucial here, both for the future of work as well as for the objectives set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As demonstrated during the financial crisis, jobs were not lost in the area of the social economy/social innovation: indeed the number of new enterprises is growing continuously, providing work for young people within and outside urban centres. Social enterprises
help boost the integration of vulnerable groups in society, achieve social goals and reduce economic disparities. For this reason, it would be a major success for the next presidency if it were to help remove obstacles to the development of social enterprises, in particular through fairer and more efficient financing.

Beyond internal development and cohesion, however, the EU has always sought and continues to pursue cooperation with neighbouring countries in the areas of trade, security and culture. Strengthening relations with the Western Balkans, as proposed by the Bulgarian Presidency, is in line with the EESC’s aims, which are primarily realised through joint consultative committees and dialogue with civil society organisations. The aim of EU cooperation should be not only economic growth but, first and foremost, peace and prosperity in the wider region.

The need for cooperation with the Balkan countries also became clear during the migration crisis, when thousands of refugees and migrants crossed the borders of the Western Balkans seeking passage to western Europe. I am pleased with the decision of the Bulgarian Presidency to place an emphasis on migration management. However, since it may take a long time for external migration policy to deliver results, what we need right now is a fairer common asylum system, based on the principle of EU solidarity, a system which will also set criteria for the permanent sharing of asylum-seekers between the Member States.

By supporting solidarity in the EU we will be saying a resounding “No” to nationalism. However, any attempt to impose solidarity from above, for instance by the Court of Justice of the European Union, may fail if young people do not fully absorb what it means to be part of the European family, and unless this is based on a genuine European education. It is to be hoped that under the Bulgarian Presidency the question will be addressed of putting EU history and institutions on the curriculum of all EU schools so that young people are informed and the principles on which the EU was founded are upheld.

Georges DASSIS
President of the EESC
Bulgaria’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 January to 30 June 2018) will seek to strike a balance between the goals of individual Member States and the strategic ones of the European Union. The aim is to achieve real, visible outcomes in a true dialogue with Europe’s citizens on European matters and to meet their expectations of greater security, employment, sustainable growth and a stronger EU presence on the world stage.

EESC members from both Bulgaria and other Member States of the European Union hope that the Bulgarian Presidency will seek, not least in collaboration with our Committee, a broad consensus among civil society organisations in Europe on all the issues of importance for Europe’s citizens. These include: security and migration; the future of the Western Balkans; the Danube and Black Sea regions; an effective, swift and fair system of justice; a competitive single market; promoting entrepreneurship and social innovation; deepening economic and monetary union; a sustainable environment; a stable energy union; reform of the Multiannual Financial Framework; the future of the Common Agricultural Policy, and galvanising the EU’s cultural diplomacy around the world as an instrument of its foreign policy.

We are all confident that the guiding principle of the Bulgarian Presidency will be maintaining unity and solidarity among the Member States. The presidency should be an honest broker and a seeker of consensus, compromise and understanding among Member States with a view to the adoption of joint decisions and policies. In this respect, the ambition to achieve a noticeable progress on the social dimension of Europe and the European Pillar of Social Rights, including through the European Semester mechanism, will contribute to a new consensus on the most pressing issues for the European citizens and will help to increase unity and cohesion within the Union.

With the active involvement of civil society in the institutional dialogue on these policies, the EESC can make a contribution by channelling its experience and expertise through its opinions or through debates staged jointly with the Bulgarian Presidency and other representatives of the European institutions. In this collaboration with the presidency we intend to contribute to a broad discussion and to finding consensual approaches at European level to matters such as the accession of the Western Balkans, boosting the competitiveness of European businesses and promoting SMEs, citizens’ security and the future of work in the digital age.

As representatives of civil society from Bulgaria and the whole of Europe we are counting on the readiness of the Bulgarian and European institutions to provide institutional support and collaboration in all these areas and we hope that the work of the EESC will help to achieve the goals of the Bulgarian Presidency.

A word from the Bulgarian members of the EESC
The Bulgarian members of the EESC

**Employers’ Group**

ANGELOVA Milena  
Secretary-General of the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association; Executive Vice-President of the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services (CEEP)  
m.angelova@bica-bg.org

DANEV Bojidar  
Executive President of the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BSK) – Union of Bulgarian Business; Member of the Council of Presidents of BusinessEurope  
danev@bia-bg.com

IVANOV Evgeniy  
Executive Director and Member of the Management Board, Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria — The Voice of Bulgarian Business (KRIIB)  
office@ceibg.bg

STOEV Georgi  
Chairman of the Trade and Investment Committee and Member of the Budgetary Committee of EUROCHAMBERS; Vice-President of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry  
g.stoev@bcci.bg

**Workers’ Group**

DIMITROV Plamen  
President of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria; Deputy Member of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office; Vice-President and Member of the Steering Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)  
pldimitrov@citub.net

KOKALOV Ivan  
Vice-President of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria, responsible for social policy; Deputy Vice-President of Public Services International (PSI); Member of the Executive Committee of the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)  
iokalov@citub.net

MANOLOV Dimitar  
President of the Confederation of Labour PODKREPA; Member of the Supervisory Board of the National Social Security Institute; Member of the Executive Committee of the ETUC; Head of the Delegation of PODKREPA in the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation  
dimitar_manolov@podkrepa.org

MITOV Veselin  
International Secretary of PODKREPA CL; Member of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council and Chairman of the Social Policy Permanent Commission; Deputy Member of the Executive Committee of the ETUC; Vice-President of the European Centre for Workers’ Questions (EZA)  
vesko@podkrepa.org

**Various Interests Group**

DULEVSKI Lalko  
President of the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria; Professor, Chairman of the General Assembly and Head of the Human Resources and Social Protection Department at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia  
dulevski@abv.bg

INDJOVA Diana  
Chairperson of the Global Disability Movement  
dianaindjava@gmail.com

NIKOLEV Bogomil  
Executive Director of the Bulgarian Active Consumers Association  
bogomil.nikolov@eesc.europa.eu

SLAVOVA Dilyana  
National Coordinator of the Mountain Milk NGO; Member of Euramontana; Member of the European Rural Parliament and Groupe de Bruges  
dslavova@abv.bg
“The wind is back in Europe’s sails. But we will go nowhere unless we catch that wind.” As these words of European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker confirm, the European Union is gaining momentum and this should be used to swiftly address the various political, economic and social challenges it is facing. Bold decisions need to be taken on the Union’s medium- and long-term development, building on a common sense of purpose. This goes far beyond technical approaches and measures and is first and foremost a matter of political will and a shared perspective. Against this backdrop, Bulgaria assumes the responsibility during its presidency of being an honest broker and seeking consensus, stability and understanding among the Member States. The EESC will also play a part in this consensus-building: the Committee is the only EU body to have held a systematic consultation of organised civil society in the Member States on the White Paper on the future of Europe. This EESC contribution will continue with a new document aimed at shaping a Union which meets the demands and expectations of civil society and Europe’s citizens as a whole.

The Bulgarian Presidency announced that it would work on creating optimal conditions for strong economic growth in the EU, including through initiatives to strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Following its major contributions to the Five Presidents’ Report and the Reflection Paper on Deepening EMU, the Committee will stay actively engaged in this debate by promoting organised civil society’s views on the Commission’s proposals in its new Economic and Monetary Union Package. In addition, as part of the European Semester, the EESC will make a number of recommendations on the euro area economic policy to be pursued in 2018 and beyond.

The Committee will contribute its position to the proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which is expected in May 2018 and will cover the period starting in 2021. In doing so, it will build on the policy recommendations set out in its opinions on the midterm review of the MFF 2014-2020 and on the Reflection paper on the future of EU finances. It will also follow up on the recommendations of its own-initiative opinion entitled A performance-based EU budget focused on real results.


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 of the Capital Markets Union (CMU) action plan following its mid-term review. As part of this work the EESC will examine two proposed regulations that aim at creating a stronger and more integrated European financial supervision for the CMU. The Committee will also work on a
The EESC’s activities during the Bulgarian Presidency

Review of the appropriate prudential treatment for investment firms, a legislative initiative on an integrated covered bond framework, a proposal to develop a secondary market for non-performing loans (NPLs), a review of regulation on cross-border payments, and a proposal on reducing barriers to cross-border distribution of investment funds. It will also examine the proposals for a Banking Union Package completing all aspects of the Banking Union, including the finalisation of the backstop to the Single Resolution Fund and a framework for the development of sovereign bond-backed securities to support further portfolio diversification in the banking sector.

In the course of the Bulgarian Presidency, the EESC intends to devote particular attention to the debate on the territorial dimension of Cohesion policy post 2020. 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 project. 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 and social exclusion are still alarming and the EESC will continue to focus on the preservation of the European social model, placing special emphasis on the follow-up to the interinstitutional proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights and
The EESC’s activities during the Bulgarian Presidency

The Gothenburg Social Summit on Fair Jobs and Growth. Special attention will be paid to measures that increase the quality of employment and remove barriers to integration into the labour market for young people and women, and especially for the long-term unemployed and people living in poverty, as well as to initiatives under the new skills agenda and on education. In particular, the EESC will carry out a study on the labour market inclusion of the long-term unemployed and work on the quality framework for apprenticeships. It will make proposals for merging EU funding aimed at reducing poverty and severe deprivation under the next Multiannual Financial Framework and look at ways of how the resources of the European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP) to address the high and persistent level of poverty in the EU could be increased. The EESC will also carry out a more in-depth analysis of the future of live-in care.

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 Bulgarian Presidency, the EESC will draw up opinions on a “socially sustainable concept for raising living standards, boosting growth and employment, and citizens’ security in the digital era”, as well as on the “future of work – acquiring
of appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of future jobs”.

The EESC will maintain its efforts to strengthen the rule of law and fundamental rights, 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 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 balanced rural development, the EESC will focus on the re-evaluation process towards a greener and leaner post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), notably by means of an opinion on the Commission communication on the future CAP, expected to be adopted by the end of 2017. The Committee will continue pushing for practical implementation of the territorial impact assessment of all EU policies, dubbed “rural proofing” in the Cork 2.0 Declaration “A Better Life in Rural Areas”. Participation of the EESC in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) working group on Smart Villages will be a way to promote the ideas presented in the EESC’s own-initiative opinion on Villages and small towns.

Through its Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems, the EESC will further 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. The synergies between food sustainability and the circular economy will be further developed by continued efforts to promote food waste prevention and reduction policies, in particular via the EESC participation in the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste.

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. Among such opinions foreseen for action in early 2018 are a legislative proposal on water reuse, an EU plastics strategy and a European Commission Communication on the interface between chemicals, waste and product legislations.

Contributing to the practical implementation of the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (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 European Multi-stakeholder Platform for Sustainable Development that was created in June 2016 by the Commission. The EESC will contribute to this new initiative with practical recommendations related not least to monitoring of implementation of the SDGs.
In the field of climate action, the EESC is part of an International Climate Governance Coalition (ICGC) which aims to stimulate the bottom-up engagement of various actors in a multi-stakeholder and multi-level spirit of cooperation. The EESC will continue promoting the creation of an enabling framework for the citizen and community-led climate initiatives through an exploratory opinion requested by the Commission’s DG CLIMA, which will be adopted during the Bulgarian Presidency. The EESC will also publish a study on the “Toolbox for multi-stakeholder climate partnerships – A policy framework to stimulate bottom-up climate actions” and will continue promoting its findings at various international fora and gatherings of climate actors.

Following its conference in Budapest on 27-28 November 2017, the EESC’s EU2020 Steering Committee will continue deliberations aimed at contributing to the transition to the post-2020 Europe, taking into account the ongoing economic and societal challenges facing Europe. This strategy will be structured around the themes of inclusive, sustainable and smart growth, with the active involvement of organised civil society when it comes to governance as a whole. As far as possible, the EESC will ensure that this new strategy build on topics such as “a sustainable and future-oriented environment”, which is one of the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency. The EESC will also continue its efforts in relation to the organised civil society involvement in the European semester, for instance through its yearly opinion on the Annual Growth Survey. The opinion is planned to be adopted in February 2018, in time for the Spring European Summit. The EESC’s cooperation with the national ESCs and other stakeholders continues to be very important in this connection. The broadest possible involvement is necessary in order to ensure coherence between policies at national and regional levels of the European Semester. Efforts will also be made to enhance the communication with, and involvement of, the EU2020 Steering Committee network of national ESCs and other stakeholders.

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 Bulgarian 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 will hold the third European Day of Social Economy Enterprises in June 2018. Pursuing its aim to monitor trends and present proposals on the relevant issues that affect consumers, the Committee will be holding its 20th annual European Consumer Day in Bulgaria.

The EESC is also very active in the field of research and innovation. Here, the recent opinion on the 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.

At the request of the Bulgarian Presidency, the EESC will draft exploratory opinions on SMEs and industrial policy. The promotion of SMEs in Europe is a major concern for the EESC, which will be conducting a series of hearings in six Member States (Bulgaria among them) to discuss the best way of improving the business environment for SMEs in Europe.

Following up on the recently launched new industrial policy strategy, and in order to take account of the impact of the recent
European policies, the Committee will formulate its proposals for strengthening Europe’s industrial base and for reinforcing Europe’s industrial leadership in the age of globalisation, sustainability challenges and rapid technological change. Just in time for the start of the new presidency, the EESC will frame its proposals on delivering common defence capabilities under the Defence Fund and its recommendations for enhancing the competitiveness and innovation of the EU defence industry under the Defence Industrial Development programme. The EESC will also look closely at the industrial dimension of the health sector, which is one of Europe’s fastest growing sectors and is profoundly affected by digitalisation and Industry 4.0. As for the European maritime technology industry, the EESC will set out the measures that should be implemented to achieve the Europe 2020 targets on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The completion of the Digital Single Market is one of the top priorities in 2018 of both the Bulgarian Presidency and the European Commission. The EESC will continue providing expertise on topics of paramount importance, in particular the data economy and cyber security as essential conditions for boosting productivity, innovation and employment in Europe. Building on its recent work, the EESC will engage with more specific legislative proposals deriving from the current data package as proposed by the European Commission. The package is a set of measures aiming to de-block the huge potential of the European data economy. The work will thus include the already published proposal on the free flow of non-personal data and the upcoming initiatives on: accessibility and reuse of public and publicly-funded data; unfair contractual clauses and trading practices in platform-to-businesses relationships; and online platforms to safeguard
a fair, predictable, sustainable and trusted business environment in the online economy. A flourishing digital economy is not possible without robust cyber security, a strong degree of trust and high standards of data protection. In the course of the Bulgarian Presidency, the EESC will work intensively on the Commission’s recently presented cybersecurity package setting out concrete measures as a response to the new cyber-threats. The focus will be on the proposal to strengthen the Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA) and an implementation toolkit for the Network and Information Security Directive. The Committee will also discuss Commission’s initiatives to boost research capacity and build effective and appropriate skills in the cyber security field.

The EESC will build on its previous opinions on the European Energy Union and continue to engage with more specific legislative proposals. Following the extensive work on the ten opinions in response to the European Commission’s “Clean Energy for All Europeans” package, the Committee seeks to continue its efforts on making EU energy policies more relevant to the everyday life of citizens and civil society. Specifically, the EESC will focus, firstly, on closely monitoring, strongly supporting and engaging with the setting-up of the 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 produce an opinion on the Third 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 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. To this end, the EESC will organise a follow-up public event to the European Energy Dialogue conference and mount a strong presence at the European
Commission’s annual Citizens’ Energy Forum in London. In addition, members of the Committee will address EU policies (interconnectivity target, list of Projects of Common Interest, regional cooperation) that promote **solidarity and interconnectivity** between different regions of the EU, including the Western Balkans. One example of this engagement is the active participation in the European Commission’s annual Energy Infrastructure Forum and Clean Energy for Islands Forum.

In line with the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency 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. At the same time, 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 (including market access), decarbonisation, digitalisation and the social dimension of the transport sector. More particularly, the Committee will work on the reduction of negative externalities by the combined transport of goods, on the deployment of clean and energy efficient road vehicles and the alternative fuels infrastructure, as well as on the competitiveness and sustainability of EU air transport, in order to reach a sustainable mobility in Europe. As a follow-up to its recent activities, the Committee will also closely follow the **digitalisation and automation**
trends in transport, as well as the work of a newly established “EU Platform for Change” aiming to increase women’s employability and thus reach gender equality in the transport sector. The EESC will also further advocate the implementation of the Connecting Europe Facility and the TEN-T policy. In this context, the Committee will continue to expand the dialogue between public authorities and civil society, in particular on selected core corridors of the TEN-T network, in order to improve understanding and acceptance of transport policy measures and the quality and efficiency of the decisions to be taken.

The Committee will further promote the expectations of civil society to ensure the provision of services of general interest in a competitive and fairer single market and that 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 action on neighbourhood, enlargement and trade.

The Bulgarian 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 Bulgarian 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 Bulgarian 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, e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Central America, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and South Korea. It will follow up on EU trade negotiations and civil society monitoring of EU agreements. Special attention will be paid to the agreements with Canada, Japan, Morocco, Chile and Mercosur. The presidency will be invited to follow up on the EESC’s work on those agreements and, more generally, its work on trade and sustainable development and responsible business conduct in global value chains.

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 work on certain horizontal issues such as the EU strategy on international cultural relations.
Bulgaria is on the eve of a historic occasion. On 1 January 2018 the country will take over the rotating presidency of the EU Council.

Analysts are saying that the Council presidency is a test of Bulgaria’s maturity as an EU Member State. For a period of six months, the country will become the main driving force for the tasks on the Union’s agenda; it will combine the roles of honest broker, political leader, representative and coordinator. We are prepared for this – we know what we want to achieve and how we can do it.

All our actions as a country holding the rotating Council presidency will be developed through the prism of unity and solidarity between the Member States. It is not by chance that we have chosen United We Stand Strong as our motto. This is the slogan of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. It is also the slogan for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2018. Because today, more than ever, we need to stand united in order to succeed in solving our common problems, defend our common values and guarantee our common wellbeing, security and democracy.

The first Bulgarian Presidency has three main messages: consensus, competitiveness, cohesion.

Migration and security policy is one of the topics where we need consensus. We will work towards long-lasting, fair solutions in asylum policy, effective policies for return and readmission and a balanced approach between short- and long-term measures, targeting the source of the migration problem rather than the consequences. Without security and stability,
European values are hard to achieve. That is why security will be the primary focus of our efforts.

The competitiveness of Europe’s economies is the key to European citizens’ future. The digital market and innovation are at the core of technological development and a fundamental element of the programme of the Estonia – Bulgaria – Austria presidency trio, which we will actively work on. It is of paramount importance to safeguard the growth of Member States’ economies; it is important that all Member States participate in the debate on the euro area on an equal footing, regardless of whether they are members of the euro area or not. The only chance for Europe, for all of us, is to stop seeing the euro as a currency for the “chosen ones” with a dividing line running between East and West, between rich and poor.

The future of Europe is inseparably linked to cohesion policy. It provides added value to EU citizens and is a proven example of a working instrument for reducing the differences between us, which guarantees the success of the European model. That is why our presidency will work to build active and constructive debate on the Multiannual Financial Framework. We are aware that the world is constantly changing, and tackling the emerging challenges requires resources, but we believe that new funds should not be used at the expense of existing funds, and also that a balance is needed between financial instruments and grant funding.

Talking of a united Europe, we must not forget that we have to provide a clear European perspective for the Western Balkans. The aim of the Bulgarian Presidency is to develop an action plan with each country which sets out tangible steps but does not create unrealistic expectations.

Young people will be the focus of all our actions. We will have to answer to them for where we lead the EU now. They are our shared investment in the future; it is for them that we have to provide opportunities for education and development. Fostering early child development, modernisation of the European education systems and curricula, and strengthening social inclusion through formal and informal learning – these are just a few of the tasks that cannot be put off. Now more than ever, in the age of information and communication technology, it is essential for these technologies to be widely introduced at all levels of the education system.

The Europe of tomorrow will be what we make it today. Now is the time to build a stronger, more secure and united European Union. That is why the Bulgarian Presidency will be open to all European citizens.

Lilyana PAVLOVA
Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Council

Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union
General information on Bulgaria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Bulgarian flag:</th>
<th>The Bulgarian coat of arms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Official name       | Republic of Bulgaria       |
| Capital             | Sofia                      |
| Area\(^1\)          | 110 370 km\(^2\)           |
| Other main towns (in terms of population) | Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas |
| National language   | Bulgarian                  |
| Currency            | Lev (BGN)                  |
| Population (2016)\(^2\) | 7 153 784         |
| GDP in current prices (in millions of euro, 2016)\(^3\) | 47 364              |
| GDP per capita (in Purchasing Power Standards [PPS], EU-28 = 100, 2016)\(^4\) | 48                   |
| Employment rate (persons aged 20-64 years, 2016)\(^5\) | 67.7%                 |
| Unemployment rate (2016)\(^6\) | 7.6%                    |
| Main exports\(^7\)  | Electrical equipment; mineral fuels and oils; machinery; copper ore and products; cereals |
| Main imports\(^8\)  | Mineral fuels and oils; machinery; electrical equipment; vehicles; plastics; pharmaceuticals |
| Calling code        | +359                       |
| Time zone           | UTC +2                     |

Following Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union in 2007, the Bulgarian alphabet became the third European alphabet – after the Latin and Greek alphabets – to feature in the new Europa series of euro banknotes.
## For your diary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-18 January 2018</td>
<td>EESC plenary session. Presenting the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency</td>
<td>(Brussels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 March 2018</td>
<td>Meeting of the EESC Various Interests Group</td>
<td>(Sofia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-23 March 2018</td>
<td>Meeting of the EESC Employers’ Group</td>
<td>(Sofia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-24 May 2018</td>
<td>EESC plenary session. Bulgarian cultural evening</td>
<td>(Brussels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-22 June 2018</td>
<td>Meeting of the EESC Workers’ Group</td>
<td>(Sofia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12 July 2018</td>
<td>EESC plenary session. Presenting the results of the Bulgarian Presidency</td>
<td>(Brussels)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>