



*"Regaining Citizens' Trust and Confidence in the EU:
7 priorities of the Diversity Europe Group"*

*Recommendations of the Extraordinary Meeting of the
Diversity Europe Group:
Contribution to the EESC Roadmap 'From Cracow to Sibiu and Beyond'*

20 July 2018

Preamble

The European Union urgently needs to re-brand itself around an old dream, a new vision and a new narrative. We must renew the European promise which was given to citizens. The contribution of the EU to peace in Europe should never be forgotten, nor underestimated. However, each generation of Europeans must find their own purpose within the European project. In 2018, citizens have lost sight of the vision, role and direction of the EU. The ligaments which tied citizens to the European project have shrivelled and the dream whereby European citizens would themselves demand more integration, seems very distant. Nonetheless, building a European identity can only be achieved bottom-up. By entering into, engaging with and shaping the building process of this identity. The EESC must be at the heart of this process, expressing the hopes, aims, fears and needs of civil society. Communicating and praising the successes, advantages and achievements of the EU. Crucially, all Institutions should call on the Committee to fulfil this role and to support it with appropriate European resources. For as the philosopher Simone Weil stated *"The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real"*. Only a European Union built firmly in and directed by the realities of a strong civil society, will have any chance of surviving to Sibiu and beyond. It is this civil society reflected here by the Diversity Europe Group of the EESC, which calls for a **European New Deal**, to be built on seven priorities:

- 1. Defending European values, fundamental rights and the rule of law.** It is imperative that responsibility for communicating and defending the values of the EU are shared by all EESC Members, civil society representatives and European citizens. Thus, it is important that the respect for the rule of law, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 2 of the TEU, are placed at the centre of the EU's identity and actions. Infringements should be responded to resolutely by the European Institutions and the principles of Liberal Democracy upheld. Greater efforts should also be made to raise awareness of European rights and values in Member States, to reverse the shrinking civic space and to support an enabling environment for civil society. Without concerted action by a strong and effective civil society, democracy in Europe risks being seriously undermined by an encroaching populism, which provides simplistic solutions to complex challenges. In addition, the EU should ensure that *'nobody's rights are left behind'* by signing the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, protecting the rights of minorities, observing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and mainstreaming the rights of the disabled in all Committee activities and gender strategies. Ultimately, European citizens must feel protected by the values and rules that the EU has adopted for itself.
- 2. Placing the Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of the EU's political identity.** To date, the EU has failed to sufficiently change its growth model towards sustainability and the 2030 Agenda. Moving towards balanced economic, social and environmental development, ecological security and tackling sustainability at its root, should be overarching EU priorities to be translated into all EU policies, programmes and funds. By transiting towards an inclusive, equitable, resilient, low-carbon, circular, collaborative and innovation based economy, the EU will be able to address many of the criticisms that it currently faces as a centralised, top-down and elitist actor. By rethinking European growth models, moving beyond purely GDP considerations and by rendering responsible consumers, young and elderly citizens, it would be possible to re-instil a degree of hope and trust in national and European authorities. However, the SDGs must be communicated to citizens as tangible *opportunities* for their daily lives: for job creation, for community development, for investment in education and health, for rural development, environmental protection, etc. Every city, town and village must feel part of this new sustainable Europe.
- 3. Promoting a Europe that cares for and protects its citizens.** Poverty eradication, the first SDG of the 2030 Agenda, must be re-positioned at the centre of all EU objectives and actions. The current excessive levels of poverty, social exclusion and inequalities have dispelled citizen's beliefs in the ideal of a "Europe of Prosperity" and in the European social market economy. Moreover, the multitude of insecurities currently felt by citizens, have led to dangerously low levels of trust and populist electoral gains. Hence, it is crucial to re-instil the sentiment of 'EU protection' among citizens. For example, by effectively implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EESC should take a leading role in monitoring its implementation. Promoting respect for social rights and the well-being of Europeans, EU support to diverse forms of enterprise, notably the social economy and new economic models, would also demonstrate to citizens that the Union actively defends its values and that it supports diverse economic models. To this end, an EU Action Plan on the Social Economy is necessary. In addition, it is recommended that the EU complements economic reporting in the European Semester, with reporting on social and environmental progress (capturing societal impact).
- 4. Creating a common and just European migration policy.** The EU urgently needs a new, common migration policy which respects the principles of European cohesion, solidarity, fairness and human rights. Managing the influx of migrants and refugees into the EU should not be left only to the frontier Member States. Moreover, the EU's future migration policy should not worsen social inequalities within the host countries and the media should be

encouraged to present a more balanced reporting on the impact of migration into the EU and its Member States.

- 5. Ensuring a Single Market that benefits all citizens.** The effective functioning of the European Single Market, without distortions, should be among the key short-term objectives of the EU. Currently, criticisms of the Single Market abound, e.g.: the CAP is based on an outdated model, the EU over-regulates leading to inefficiencies, it attempts to regulate sectors against their wishes, small businesses, SMEs and social economy enterprises need fairer taxation and competition rules in order to stimulate rural areas, citizens have become victims of globalisation with the dislocation of companies to third countries, etc. One by one, the above concerns should be addressed and strong efforts should be made to raise awareness of the benefits of the Single Market to the lives of citizens. Particularly worrying is the belief by many consumers that they are not sufficiently protected by EU legislation. A targeted communication to consumer organisations to reverse these beliefs is necessary, as is explicit civil society support for the EC proposal for a New Deal for Consumers. Moreover, consumer protection for new economic models should be strengthened. Finally, in anticipation of digitalisation and the changes to the world of work, to future European demography and the levels of provision of social services of general interest, it is imperative that the EU invests more in R & D and that it provides enabling policies for social/societal innovation, to be driven by civil society and citizens.
- 6. Effectively communicating Europe.** Lessons must be learnt from the Brexit referendum and the electoral gains of left and right wing European populists. Effectively communicating to citizens the real *positive results* of EU membership and countering misinformation and disinformation on the EU, should be the priority and responsibility of *all* European Institutions, European bodies and Member States. The EESC should become a protagonist in this process, speaking on behalf of citizens and civil society, focussing on informing its Member organisations on the benefits of the EU, actively joining #ThisTimeImVoting campaign prior to the elections to the European Parliament and organising more going local events. It is recommended that the EESC identifies one key event in each Member State and participate on an annual basis, thus raising the profile of the Committee and promoting the added value of the EU. Efforts should also be made to clarify to citizens the principle of subsidiarity and to explain that the EU respects both cultural diversity and local traditions. A 'simple to read' annual guide, updating citizens and civil society organisations on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the respect for EU values and fundamental rights should also be published. Successful initiatives demonstrating the positive contribution of the EU, e.g. the project "Peace Bread", could also be extended to other EU countries. At the same time, it is crucial to join efforts with other EU Institutions in countering disinformation targeting EU citizens, by actors from outside the EU.
- 7. Actively listening to European citizens.** The EU is still not reaching out sufficiently to ordinary citizens. It needs to *actively* listen and engage in dialogue, rather than speaking at citizens. EU policies should be much more *responsive* to proposals by citizens, communities and civil society, giving them a reason to be involved, helping to discourage their attraction to populists and encouraging bottom-up participation. The EU must also decentralise its dialogue so that localities, cities and regions begin to develop a joint European purpose and identity. Moreover, the EESC should regularly evaluate the implementation of EU policies in Member States, in order to provide concrete responses to citizens on the impact of EU membership on their daily lives. Regular and independent evaluations of EU citizen and civil society consultations must also take place, with the EESC taking a leading role. Lastly, the pivotal role of civil society organisations in bridging the gap with European citizens must be better recognised and supported by the EU.