More unity, solidarity and competitiveness, and no second-class citizens

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker expressed his optimism about Europe at the EESC plenary session in September. He mentioned the creation of 8 million new jobs, the reduction of the budget deficit, more than EUR 225 billion in investments as part of the Juncker Plan, the launch of the European Solidarity Corps and the EU’s progress in international trade. The Commission President also shared some of his concerns with EESC members and asked for the Committee’s help in addressing them: “The Social Pillar is something which I feel very strongly about. I believe Europe must better take on board the concerns and the needs of those who are working. Otherwise, Europe is going to break up into two parts - those who are the winners, those who benefit, and those who, whether it is wrong or right, believe they have been forgotten by the EU project.”

“We will not leave you alone in your efforts,” replied the EESC President, Georges Dassis. “Whatever option for the future of Europe is selected, the EESC wants a cohesive and coherent European Union, a Union that is able to deliver on providing fully-fledged equal opportunities for all. The EESC is determined to help achieve this.” Mr Dassis gave Mr Juncker the reports from the national debates on The Future of Europe organised by the EESC in 27 Member States earlier this year.

Jacek Krawczyk, President of the Employers’ Group, welcomed the Commission’s initiatives on the European trade agenda and renewed industrial strategy. “Our goal must be the most attractive ecosystem for investing, for operating and for trading. An ecosystem that will attract capital and create jobs, but also one that will help in addressing them: “The Social Pillar is something which I feel very strongly about. I believe Europe must better take on board the concerns and the needs of those who are working. Otherwise, Europe is going to break up into two parts - those who are the winners, those who benefit, and those who, whether it is wrong or right, believe they have been forgotten by the EU project.”

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A few weeks before the European Commission vote on a ten year renewal of the glyphosate licence, the EESC offered a forum for discussion during its plenary on Wednesday, 20 September. Two of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) proponents, David Schwartz from WeMove.eu and Herman van Bekkem from Greenpeace, were invited to present their goals. The ECI “Ban Glyphosate” proposes a ban on glyphosate, a reform of the pesticide approval procedure and EU-wide mandatory reduction targets for pesticide use. The proponents collected over 1.3 million signatures in 5 months. They believed that the EU’s goal should be a pesticide free future.

The question of a possible ban on glyphosate has divided public opinion all over Europe, not least because of the controversial results of impact studies. These diverging views were also reflected at a debate organised earlier this year at a meeting of the section on Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) and in the different statements of EESC members during the plenary debate.

Brendan Burns, the President of the EESC’s NAT section, got to the heart of the issue: “No one wants unhealthy chemicals in our environment or food. However, the debate we organized on 5 April at our section meeting, with ECI promoters and an equal number of pro- and anti-glyphosate representatives as speakers, demonstrated that there is no consensus on the environmental and health effects of glyphosate.”

EESC-President Georges Dassis concluded: “We are not scientists, but obviously we have to accept studies, provided these are objective studies. People should definitely be placed above the interests of multinational corporations, and 1.3 million Europeans cannot be ignored. It is the EU’s very duty to respond to its citizens in a solution-oriented way based on real scientific arguments.”
Loss of biodiversity endangers our livelihood

The EESC sounded the alarm amid a summer of freak-weather events. Several EESC proposals for the better protection of nature have been met with no reaction so far. “We again call on the Commission and Member States to ensure a swift and consistent implementation of the biodiversity strategy, particularly of the Birds and Habitat Directives and the Water Directive”, said EESC member Lutz Ribbe (Various Interests Group, DE), referring to his opinion on EU biodiversity policy.

The EESC calls for a dedicated Natura 2000 budget and for making biodiversity a cross-cutting issue

The Natura 2000 network is aimed at preserving rare and unique habitats, nearly all Natura 2000 sites have been designated but only a few enjoy permanent legal protection and have management plans. “This is evidence of incapacity or just ignorance on the part of the EU and many Member States. We understand that the EU is facing many challenges. But we must not forget that biodiversity is our livelihood and continued plundering of our nature robs us of this livelihood”, warned Mr. Ribbe. Currently Natura 2000 areas are almost exclusively funded by the European Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, which often causes a conflict of interest. Therefore, the EESC calls for an extra Natura 2000 budget.

Biodiversity needs to be included in other policies too, particularly in the agricultural sector which causes the highest degrees of pressure on terrestrial ecosystems. “We do hope that the mid-term review of the ‘ecological footprint’ and the upcoming reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will also focus on the achievement of the biodiversity objectives”, said Mr. Ribbe. (sma)

Critical minds and sense of belonging are key weapons against radicalisation

Focusing on social inclusion of young people, helping them to develop a sense of identity and teaching them how to think critically are among the most important elements of successfully preventing youth radicalisation, a hearing held by the EESC in September revealed.

However, the hearing The role of civil society in the prevention of radicalization of young people also showed that society tends to act only after something has happened and that there was no coordinated, multi-agency approach.

One of the speakers at the hearing was Jessica Soors, head of service for de-radicalisation in the Belgian city of Vilvoorde, which has a large number of foreign fighters among other cities in Europe. Her first advice to local communities also referred to need for tackling radicalisation, something her town was not when young citizens started to leave to fight in foreign conflicts. Ms Soors said work on radicalisation should not start with individual casework or law enforcement, but with prevention, which should begin in schools.

Other speakers said schools should pay more attention to teaching social and civic competencies and should focus on diversity and active citizenship. Increasing complexity in thinking and developing a critical mind-set from a young age were also among the most powerful weapons against the lure of radicalisation.

The speakers included representatives from the European Commission, as well as education experts and representatives of organisations involved in formal or non-formal education of the young.

The EESC is preparing an opinion on this topic, due to be adopted in December. (II)

The EESC calls on the Commission to better promote the EU’s sugar industry

As beet sugar production quotas end this October, the European sugar industry will find itself in a completely new situation. Whether this new challenge will turn into a success story largely depends on how the EU supports Europe’s beet sugar processors and sugar beet farmers.

Just ahead of the abolition of quotas in sugar beet production on 1 October, the EESC adopted an own-initiative opinion on Industrial change in the EU beet sugar industry. The end of beet sugar production quotas will provide the EU’s sugar industry with the possibility of unlimited sugar exports. “This is an enormous chance for Europe’s sugar producers, but in order to fully profit from this liberalisation, they need the European Commission’s full support”, says EESC member José Manuel Roche Ramo (Various Interests Group, ES), rapporteur for the EESC opinion. In the EESC’s view, the EU would be well advised to be more cautious regarding trade liberalisation or just ignorance on the part of the EU and many Member States. We understand that the EU is facing many challenges. But we must not forget that biodiversity is our livelihood and continued plundering of our nature robs us of this livelihood”, warned Mr. Ribbe. (sma)

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Posted workers: it’s high time to revise the directive

EESC President Georges Dassis has co-signed a statement with the President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, Patrick Bernasconi, urging a radical overhaul of EU legislation on the posting of workers to combat social dumping, noting the EU must always aim at an upward harmonisation, and convergence of working and living conditions in the EU, they say, urging Member States opposing the reform to drop their resistance.

The two Presidents call on European legislators to ensure the temporary nature of posting and on Member States to pool available data to combat frauds and unfair competition by businesses set up for the sole purpose of exploiting wage gaps between EU Member States. They also ask for practical measures to ensure that workers join a social security scheme prior to posting and the creation of a European card of posted workers to simplify controls and procedures. They also insist for the directive to be made applicable to the transport sector.


Welcome to the new EESC website!

The EESC’s website was relaunched in August 2017. It is now fully responsive, i.e. usable via any computer or mobile device. The site’s language range was also reviewed to improve its user-friendliness: the website may now be navigated, and any general presentations introducing the activities and bodies of the Committee may be browsed by 24 languages. The structure and the content of the pages have been rethought, simplified and updated to provide quicker and easier access to the EESC’s work. (II)

Take a look at http://www.eesc.europa.eu/

New forms of work – opportunities and challenges

One of the focuses of the EESC plenary debate in September was new forms of work. In the adopted opinion on new forms of work and skills (rapporteur: Ulrich Samm, Employers, DE) the EESC points out the emergence of many atypical forms such as part-time work, work with multiple contractors and “crowdworking”, with workers offering their skills on internet platforms and networks of highly qualified and specialized professionals. All stakeholders should coordinate their efforts in order to better deal with the associated risks – the provision of social security and the avoidance of poverty must be given high priority. The EESC acknowledges that automation and robots are also having an increasing impact on work. While they could have a positive effect on the economy in an ageing society, they are also affecting jobs: social dialogue on this point should take place at an early stage. In the future, lifelong learning and professional training will be a necessity for everyone: in this context, it should be ensured that all workers have access to traditional, company-based training schemes.

Long-term developments, on the other hand, can be best tackled through general education.

In its opinion on the role of social partners and civil society organisations in the new forms of work (rapporteur: Franca Salis-Madinier, Workers, FR) the EESC emphasizes that at this time of far-reaching changes for workers, the key objectives and principles of social dialogue and collective bargaining still hold true. Their role is not to oppose changes but to steer them, in order to reap their full benefits, whilst ensuring that fundamental workers’ rights are still respected. There is a need for participative management, for collective rules to be drawn up, for the adaptation of social dialogue and to find innovative responses. Digitalisation has a far-reaching impact on work – it can provide some workers with opportunities and bring jobs with no reaction so far. “We again call on the Commission and Member States to ensure a swift and consistent implementation of the biodiversity strategy, particularly of the Birds and Habitat Directives and the Water Directive”, said EESC member Lutz Ribbe (Various Interests Group, DE), referring to his opinion on EU biodiversity policy.

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Biodiversity needs to be included in other policies too, particularly in the agricultural sector which causes the highest degrees of pressure on terrestrial ecosystems. “We do hope that the mid-term review of the ‘ecological footprint’ and the upcoming reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will also focus on the achievement of the biodiversity objectives”, said Mr. Ribbe. (sma)
European Energy Union: make it a social win too

Concerns over the social costs of the energy transition ran through all panel discussions at the European Energy Dialogue, organised by the EESC in Brussels on 7 September. The event focused on the European Commission’s proposed Clean Energy for All Europeans package as seen by a wide spectrum of civil society stakeholders debating with European institutions and market players.

Hailed by all players as a very positive set of measures bringing together for the first time energy and climate action into a coherent programme, the Clean Energy package nonetheless gave rise to some serious concerns as regards the social dimension, especially the way it deals with the burning issue of energy poverty.

Is it realistic, asked civil society stakeholders, to expect people living from pay check to pay check to invest in solar panels, photovoltaic equipment, or energy efficient appliances when they have to choose between buying food and heating their homes? They should not be forced into making investments that they cannot, or are not ready to, make, nor should they be expected to subsidise the investments made by the more affluent. Social tariffs should not be banned, but may need to be considered as necessary in order to protect vulnerable consumers, said civil society stakeholders.

Concerns were also voiced about the job implications of the energy transition, and the need to shield regions that rely on the production of fossil fuels such as coal and shale from the adverse consequences of the transition.

As the bulk of funds would have to come from the private sector, the EESC calls on all political leaders in the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean to acknowledge and value the participation of civil society. This will ensure the involvement of the largest possible number of citizens in the decision-making process. The EESC has repeatedly pointed out the lack of broad access to information as one of the key problems in the monitoring of EU relations with CELAC. The lack of transparency also prevents civil society from drawing up proposals in good time. It is essential to put in place clear rules and procedures governing access to and dissemination of this information. According to the EESC, there should also be sufficient material resources to ensure civil society’s involvement in the negotiations and in formal and open dialogue with the authorities. (sg)

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EESC first institution to have adopted a position on CCCTB

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The EU wants to combat aggressive tax planning and contribute to growth, competitiveness and fairness in the Single Market. The revamped European Commission proposals on a Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base (CCCTB) are aimed at addressing this objective. The EESC has been the first institution to adopt a position on these proposals. In its opinion on the CCCTB (rapporteur: Michael McLaughlin, Various Interests, IE), the Committee endorses the aims of the proposals as well as the creation of a single set of rules to calculate companies’ taxable EU profits and the attribution of income to the place where the value is created. It believes that a CCCTB could generate benefits for all, if it delivers simplicity and certainty of corporate taxation and reduces tax barriers and complexity.

Nevertheless, the EESC recommends making the greatest efforts to seek the CCCTB by consensus, allowing for the sensitive nature of the issues as regards subsidiarity and state sovereignty. It urges the parties concerned to pursue speedy completion of the proposed stages. The EESC also draws attention to the need to address the challenges of the digital economy and proposes to consider including intellectual property in the apportionment formula. It believes that the sales by destination key may need changes to ensure equitable implementation and suggests undertaking a detailed impact assessment of a CCCTB.

In a separate opinion - on a favourable tax system for fair competition and growth (rapporteur: Petru Sorin Dandea, Workers, RO) - the EESC asks Member States to step up efforts for combating aggressive tax planning and tax avoidance. It recommends carrying out tax reforms and avoiding the use of tax rulings that are not justified by the economic substance of the transactions. (jk)

Over 100 bids entered for EESC 2017 Civil Society Prize

This year, the Civil Society Prize has received 111 applications from all over the European Union. The prize will reward “innovative projects promoting quality employment and entrepreneurship for the future of work”, honouring initiatives which seek to create sustainable jobs and encourage entrepreneurship, in particular for underrepresented and disadvantaged population groups.

The Civil Society Prize, now in its ninth year, shines a spotlight on a different key aspect of the EESC’s work each year. One of the EESC’s main concerns over the past year has been the European employment strategy and how to combat the most worrying forms of unemployment, such as youth and long-term unemployment, and promote the integration of newcomers on the labour market.

Through its prize, the EESC wants to reward the contribution of civil society organisations and individuals that have made a significant contribution to promoting European integration.

The EESC will now begin the task of evaluating the applications, with a view to announcing the winners on 7 December 2017, at its plenary session. Further details about the Civil Society Prize are available online at http://bit.ly/2yKlZRY (mr)
Advantages of Digital society
by the EESC’s Employers’ Group

On 25 October, as part of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU, the EESC’s Employers’ Group is organising a conference in Tallinn on the advantages of digital society.

Digital innovation and technology are changing today’s society by giving new opportunities to businesses, governments and citizens in a wide range of sectors, including industry, health, social media, e-services, data and many more. The digital world moves fast. Is the EU single market ready for the digital era? Europeans need to think about how the EU can take advantage of the digital revolution in order to remain competitive and create more jobs. Estonia, as a leader in ICT and digital services, is the perfect location to raise these questions.

During the afternoon session, members discussed the opportunities and challenges digitalisation and innovation present for the workers and labour market, drawing on the EU’s economic and social framework. The debate was held under the auspices of the International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Co-operative Economy (CIRIEC), with contributions from the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee.

The setup could not have been chosen more appropriately, as Estonia is considered to be the EU country most advanced in digitalisation and very open to ICT innovation, keen to put all new ideas into practice very rapidly.

After a welcome address by Gabriele Bischoff, President of the Workers Group, and a speech by Eiki Nestor, Speaker of the National Parliament, who presented the EU semester of the Estonian Presidency, members had a closer look at the Digital Agenda 2020 for Estonia, which in many circles is considered an excellent example of promoting digital development in the economy and society.

Recent evolutions of the social economy in the EU
by the EESC’s Various Interests Group

For the third time, following its 2008 and 2012 studies, the EESC has published a study on Recent evolutions of the social economy in the European Union, commissioned at the initiative of the Social Economy Category, which is managed by the Various Interests Group.

This study, which was entrusted to the International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Co-operative Economy (CIRIEC), has not simply updated its predecessors, but also focuses on three areas: the social economy and emerging concepts/movements, public policies in the broader meaning of the term framed in recent years at EU level and in the Member States to improve the social economy sector and, lastly, the size of the social economy in each EU Member State.

Concretely, the study enables us to measure progress by providing reliable and comparable data. What is evident is that the social economy has emerged from the economic and financial crisis largely unscathed. Today, it provides paid employment to 6.3% of the working population in the EU–28, compared to 6.5% in 2012.

Moreover, it is an opportunity to remind ourselves what the social economy brings to our society today. Based on a different model from capital enterprises, the social economy holds an important place, working with and alongside the market economy. By ensuring that social enterprises serve social needs, the social economy creates genuine interdependence between economic and social issues rather than making one subordinate to the other.

Finally, the social economy illustrates and defends the values on which the EU was built (Article 3 TEU). It is both an opportunity for a vehicle for citizen participation, responsibility and ownership of our sustainable future. Moreover, it constitutes a far-reaching instrument to enable the EU to move closer to its commitments under the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.


The best of Estonian Wilderness to be seen at the EESC

7 November – 8 December 2017

On a proposal from the Estonian EESC members, the Committee is organising the second and last exhibition during the Estonian EU Presidency entitled Estonian Wilderness. In this photo exhibition you will meet the best of Estonian wilderness: landscapes, flowers, birds and large mammals. Estonia offers a lot to nature lovers, with a landscape that is as diverse as the plants and animals. Deserted beaches, deep forests, picturesque lakes and rivers, and mysterious swamps contain a hidden and vibrant life of birds, seals and bears.

“Ever closer Union” - The legacy of the Treaties of Rome for today’s Europe - 1957-2017

18 October – 3 November 2017

To mark the 60th anniversary of this momentous event, the Historical Archives of the European Union have organised an exhibition on the Treaties and their legacy.

This exhibition is the fruit of a partnership between the Historical Archives of the European Union and the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission, with contributions from the European Investment Bank, the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian press agency ANSA.

The exhibition also highlights the roots of the Treaties in the social, cultural and economic phenomena that affected Europe after World War II, and traces the long-term impact of the European integration process on our citizens’ everyday lives.

EESC Info goes digital

A new online version of the EESC’s newsletter has been launched in December 2017. The first issue will be available in English, French and German, while all the other linguistic versions will be distributed in the traditional pdf format. As of January 2018, only the new version will be published in all languages.

The new, fully digital version will have an HTML format and will be sent out to readers by email. It will be usable on various devices, including mobile phones and tablets, and searchable in 23 EU languages. Readers will be able to share articles on social media, comment on them and share their comments. Print-on-demand will also be available. Subscribers to the current print version who are interested in receiving the new web-first newsletter are kindly invited to write to eescinfo@eesc.europa.eu, specifying which language version they wish to receive.